Kit Carson and the "Americanization" of New Mexico

Barton H. Barbour

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

Recommended Citation

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 disc@unm.edu.
Kit Carson and the “Americanization” of New Mexico

Barton H. Barbour

Kit Carson, the mountain man, “Indian scout,” soldier, guide, and Freemason, lay dying at the age of fifty-nine in Fort Lyon, Colorado Territory, in May 1868. He reclined on a simple bed made of a blanket and a buffalo robe spread on the floor of his doctor’s quarters at the Fort Lyon hospital close by the banks of the Arkansas River near the mouth of the Purgatory River. Ever since 1860, when his horse lost its footing on a steep slope and dragged him for some distance, Carson had suffered discomfort from an aneurysm, a damaged blood vessel above his heart. Over time the swollen aneurysm became a painful obstruction in his upper chest that caused frequent coughing and made breathing difficult. A recent visit to the “states” for medical consultation convinced Carson that his condition was irredeemable, and he returned home by stagecoach to Boggsville, Colorado Territory, in early April. At Dr. Henry R. Tilton’s behest, Carson moved from his home to the army hospital on 14 May. Warm spring weather and snowmelt

Barton H. Barbour holds a Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico and has worked as a museum curator, humanities lecturer, and university instructor. He is Assistant Professor of History at Boise State University. Previously he was employed as a historian with the National Park Service in Santa Fe, New Mexico. A specialist in North American fur trade history and the history of the American West, his most recent book is Fort Union and the Upper Missouri Fur Trade (2001). He is currently working on a biography of mountain man Jedediah Smith and a study of Fort Laramie. This article is adapted from New Mexico Lives: Profiles and Historical Stories, ed. Richard W. Etulain (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).
had flooded the Purgatory, and Carson could no longer ford the dangerous torrent to visit his doctor. Only by staying at the fort would he be assured the best available care.

Gasping for breath, Kit chatted with the doctor or other visitors when he was not in a chloroform-induced sleep. A few days slipped by as he reminisced over past deeds and old friends, and prepared to die. On 23 May, in midafternoon, he requested buffalo meat and coffee, a favorite meal of the mountain men. He ate, lit a clay pipe, and began to speak with friend Aloys Scheurich and Dr. Tilton. Suddenly Carson choked and cried out, "Doctor, Compadre, adios!" Tilton rushed to Kit's side as blood poured from the ruptured artery, then cradled the old scout's head "while death speedily closed the scene."

Kit's wife of twenty-five years, María Josefa Jaramillo, had died about a month earlier, ten days after delivering their eighth child, a girl named Josefita. Carson dictated a letter on 5 May to Scheurich, requesting his wife, Teresina, to care for the Carson-Jaramillo children after Kit died. Teresina was Carson's niece, the daughter of Charles Bent and María Ignacia Jaramillo, Carson's sister-in-law. On 15 May, Kit dictated his will. Much of his nine-thousand-dollar estate was tied up in money owed him by Lucien B. Maxwell and in land at Taos that had been in his wife’s name. Carson was buried next to Josefa (his beloved "Chipita") at Boggsville, but a year later their coffins were taken to Taos, New Mexico, home to Kit and his family much of the time from 1843 until 1867.

Word of Kit's death quickly spread. Newspapers from New York to California printed obituaries, for he had been nationally famous for more than twenty years. Today Carson's name is fixed upon—a mountain in Washington State, a highway and a National Forest in New Mexico and Colorado, a mountain pass in the Sierra Nevada, a military post in Colorado, and the state capital of Nevada. Statues and paintings of him adorn numerous western city parks, museums, and public buildings. A commemorative granite obelisk in front of a federal courthouse in Santa Fe bears the terse inscription: "He led the way." Given the adulation tendered Carson during his lifetime and for several decades following his death, it may seem surprising that the old mountaineer's reputation has sharply declined over the past twenty-five or thirty years. Stranger still, Carson's legacy has been hotly disputed for the better part of a century. In 1926 his admirer Blanche C. Grant felt obliged to defend him against criticism for his role in the Navajo Campaign. Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg, in a popular 1955 book titled
The American West, labeled Carson “a notable hater of Indians,” insisting that he “regularly” murdered an “Indian or two before breakfast.”

The man once hailed as a heroic explorer and “friend of the Indians” is now more likely to be denounced as a “Hitleresque” genocidal killer of Native Americans. How are we to account for so dramatic a reinterpretation—amounting to a reversal—of Carson’s meaning in American history? It is partly because, until the early twentieth century, biographers and writers used his life story as a vehicle for inculcating “American” moral and ideological principles. With passing time and changing perceptions, however, many icons of American history and legend have been discarded. Others—like Carson or George Armstrong Custer—have been turned inside out to symbolize Euroamerican bigotry and U.S. government repression. If Carson once symbolized positive dimensions of America’s “great westward movement,” he now epitomizes its negative aspects: the theft of Native Americans’ lands and usurpation of their sovereignty, the immoral American takeover of New Mexico, and so on.

Modern Americans in a pluralistic society have reason to deplore the use of historical characters as “handmaidens of civics” meant to promote homogeneous American ideals based upon a “superior” Anglo European cultural model. Switching positive pasteboard icons into negative ones may reflect progressive social change, but it is bad history. Many people who damn the “Indian-hating” Carson seem unaware that, in the main, the available evidence belies the charges leveled against him. Close examination of these impassioned indictments reveals what historians call “presentism,” the urge to interpret the past in modern terms, to impose modern ethics and sensitivities on past events and characters. Present-minded analysis is fundamentally ahistorical, for it refuses to deal with the past as it was. Measuring the past with an anachronistic yardstick encourages careless reasoning, and it ignores the contextual framework without which the past becomes incomprehensible.

Whatever may have been his faults or his merits, Carson was just one of many Americans who became New Mexicans in the early nineteenth century. A few hundred such men played a disproportionately important role in shaping the future of the Far West and what was formerly the Spanish-Mexican Northwest—for better or worse. Summarizing the early-nineteenth-century historical backdrop for the United States and New Mexico, and the rise of the Santa Fe trade, will shed light on why Anglo Americans came to New Mexico. Likewise, a reasonably objective, de-symbolized sketch of Carson’s life may encourage a more realistic appraisal of his place in New Mexico.
history, while reference to the mythic Carson may help explain why his legacy has been such a bitterly contested issue in recent years.

In the early 1820s many American men looked westward for economic opportunity. A wrenching depression gripped the nation after the Panic of 1819, plunging banks into ruin and forcing many mortgage foreclosures in rural areas such as Missouri, which achieved statehood in 1821. After a decade of stagnation following the War of 1812, however, the “Indian Trade” began to boom in 1822, and St. Louis boomed with it. To Missourians, the term...
Indian trade meant a combination of fur hunting and trade with Native Americans. From a Euroamerican perspective, the Indian trade had been the primary frontier economic endeavor for centuries, and it offered real possibilities for success in hard times. The fur and Indian trades helped make St. Louis the West's leading city.

Between 1822 and 1826 William H. Ashley and Andrew Henry's “enterprising young men” harvested thousands of beavers in Rocky Mountain streams, and their spectacular success lured other expectant capitalists into the Far West. Among the “Ashley men” were Jedediah S. Smith, Thomas Fitzpatrick, William Sublette, and James Clyman. Business was their first priority, but some of them made noteworthy contributions to Americans' understanding of western geography, and they acquired much knowledge about Indians. Some lived long enough to guide overland migrants during the 1840s and 1850s. Others, such as Etienne Provost, Old Bill Williams, Ewing Young, and William Workman, went southwest in the early 1820s to trap beavers in the “Mexican Country,” despite legal hurdles and the threat of conflict with resident Indians. One Ashley man, James Kirker, developed a spectacular and bizarre career as a scalp hunter and counterterrorist employed by several Mexican provinces to fight Indians during the late 1830s and early 1840s.

Like the fur trade, the Santa Fe trade was critical to St. Louis's economic health and the Southwest's future. After 1800, Americans became increasingly interested in trade with New Mexico, a land believed to possess valuable silver mines and other assets, but most early efforts failed. Spanish authorities jailed some of these adventurers; others had goods, furs, and gear confiscated. The Santa Fe trade was legalized when Mexico won independence in 1821. Jettisoning Spain's long-standing policy prohibiting foreigners from trading with New Spain, the Mexican republic welcomed American traders. Ironically, the shift reflected Mexican assumptions that the *norteamericanos* and the Republic of Mexico were “sister republics”—natural allies sharing a common ideology—and that the United States would be a good neighbor. A less happy future was in store for Mexico, but it resulted from internal weaknesses as well as external forces.

The desire for trade with Santa Fe inspired some Americans to collect information about southwestern geography, and it piqued “official” American interest in New Mexico. Lt. Zebulon Montgomery Pike's expedition to New Mexico in 1806–1807 included a few shadowy men whose interest in commerce may have been a disguise for their interest in separating New Mexico from Spain. Pike, the first man to describe the southern plains as a “Sahara,”
collected much useful data. Unfortunately, when the Lost Pathfinder blundered into Spanish country he was arrested, and the subsequent story of his expedition became so mired in duplicity and intrigue that it has baffled scholars ever since.

When Lt. Stephen H. Long toured the Rockies and southern plains in 1820, his guide and interpreter was Joseph Bijou, a French Canadian who had already spent some time in New Mexico. In 1817 Spanish soldiers arrested a party of St. Louis traders—Bijou among them—on Greenhorn Creek in present-day Colorado, and conducted them to Santa Fe. (At the time, Spain and the United States disputed each other's boundary lines for the Louisiana Purchase. The 1819 Adams-Onís Treaty temporarily settled the question.) Spanish authorities confiscated goods and furs worth about thirty thousand dollars, and the Chouteau-DeMun party languished in jail for two months before being released to make their way home. Bijou surely told Long's men about his New Mexico troubles and of the possibilities for trade.

Official interest continued to grow as commerce-minded Americans, building on Pike and Long's romantic terminology, began to envision Santa Fe as an exotic port of call at the far edge of a prairie-grass sea. In 1825 Congress appropriated $25,000 to mark and survey the road to Santa Fe and to purchase the cooperation of Indian nations living between the Missouri and Arkansas Rivers. By 1829 the United States was providing military escorts to help protect the traders' annual caravans, a practice that continued intermittently until the Mexican-American War broke out. Commerce, however, was not the only interest of the Americans.

A powerful popular spirit, soon to be named Manifest Destiny, was afoot in the United States. By the early 1820s American politicians, writers, and citizens began to cloak nationalistic foreign policy goals with an evangelical luster. The Americans imagined themselves as providentially chosen to undertake a special mission of global historical significance. This deeply rooted idea in American history can be traced to the 1630s, when the Puritan leader John Winthrop articulated his expectations for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Puritans' "New Eden" in North America never materialized, but a compelling secularized restatement of that vision gradually emerged. By the 1830s Americans considered themselves the logical, righteous claimants of North America and perhaps the entire hemisphere, based upon their presumed moral, intellectual, and racial superiority. Meanwhile, as Americans pondered the West's future, the nation's economic, political, and military structures grew more coherent and more powerful.
Financial institutions such as the Bank of the United States were designed to impose order on unregulated, wildly fluctuating currency that spawned runaway inflation. Manufactories flourished in the urbanizing Northeast, churning out a dazzling array of goods in quantities scarcely imaginable just a few years earlier. Congress passed protective tariffs to nurture the nation's industries and shelter the "infant" American industrial complex from aggressive foreign competition. As American foreign policy matured, it grew more assertive. Pres. James Monroe's annual message to Congress in 1823 included a warning to Europe that the Western Hemisphere was no longer open to colonization and that the United States would view such activity as "dangerous to our peace and safety." The Monroe Doctrine symbolized the burgeoning power of the United States and its growing interest in acquiring Latin American or Pacific colonies, lest other nations take the initiative.

Early-nineteenth-century New Mexico bore little resemblance to its expansive, sometimes arrogant neighbor. Since its founding in 1598, New Mexico had endured slow population growth, stunted economic development, and unstable relations between Hispanic settlers and their various Native American neighbors. By 1800, in geopolitical terms, New Mexico was an isolated and vulnerable place marker, imperial Spain's northernmost outpost in interior North America. New Mexico's population in 1830 was roughly forty thousand, of which one-half were indios of varying tribal affiliations. Mexico's population totaled about 6.2 million, whereas that of the United States had reached nearly 13 million and was rapidly increasing.

New Mexico lay far from Mexico City, the wellspring of political power. Routinely neglected, the province was left largely to its own devices in managing Indian-Hispanic conflicts or other matters. Even the best colonial governors, such as Juan Bautista de Anza in the 1780s, found it difficult to provide adequate defense and effective government. The rise of the Republic of Mexico brought scant relief to New Mexico's beleaguered population. Indeed, bloody rebellions erupted in several territories during 1837, when Gen. Antonio López de Santa Anna attempted to centralize political and military control and boost revenues by levying taxes on outlying provinces that formerly enjoyed low tax rates and considerable local autonomy. Alienation from the capital and heartland of Mexico eroded the bonds linking New and Old Mexico and would help facilitate an American takeover in 1846.

A chief characteristic of the province was its lack of steel, iron, glass, textiles, and other manufactured goods. One historian recently wrote that "ex-
treme misery, danger, and poverty” marked life in New Mexico prior to the American conquest, and “compared to life in Europe or the eastern United States, conditions in New Mexico were medieval.” Few people in the province were in a position to make such a comparison, but one nineteenth-century New Mexican, Rafael Chacón, recalled that the populace “lived very simply and contentedly.” Perhaps Chacón’s lens was a bit rosy, for he belonged to the small rico class. Most New Mexicans worked modest landholdings often within community or private land grants established under viceregal or, later, republican authority. Subsistence farming and ranching were general, though some people specialized in crafts such as woodworking, weaving, blacksmithing, and leather tanning. Prior to Mexican Independence, trade was restricted to a small coterie of privileged insiders with connections to Mexico City, eighteen hundred miles distant. These merchants charged exorbitant prices and preferred to sell expensive, low-bulk luxury items to the affluent rather than to ship less costly—and more bulky—goods for sale to the general public.

Spain’s once fabulous colonial empire crumbled in the late eighteenth century, a period that also saw Spanish support for the American Revolutionary War and the onset of the Napoleonic Wars. Beset by many challenges, Spain was incapable of ameliorating New Mexico’s woes after about 1780. As economic conditions and relationships with Native Americans deteriorated, the populace’s insecurity and the province’s instability increased. Mexican independence brought no relief from Ute, Apache, Comanche, and Navajo raids. In 1845, echoing several of his predecessors, Gov. Manuel Armijo opined, “The war with the Navajos is slowly consuming us.” Continuous political, social, and financial chaos in Mexico after 1821 meant that distant regions such as New Mexico could expect little aid from the central government.

The Santa Fe trade would significantly alter economic, social, and political conditions in the Republic of Mexico’s most northerly province. After William Becknell’s roundtrips from Arrow Rock, Missouri, to Santa Fe in 1821 and 1822, the “Road to Santa Fe” stayed open. Josiah Gregg, a Santa Fe trader from 1831 to 1840, became the trail’s first historian. In his 1844 classic, Commerce of the Prairies, Gregg tabulated yearly estimates of the trade. In 1822 about $15,000 in goods went to Santa Fe, mostly inexpensive mass-produced printed and plain textiles. Three years later, the trade had grown to about $65,000. By 1830 roughly $120,000 in goods went to New Mexico, of which $20,000 in merchandise was forwarded south to Chihuahua and Mexico City markets. Despite ups and downs, the trade continued to grow. By 1843 some
$450,000 worth of goods went over the trail, two-thirds of which were marketed south of El Paso del Norte. After 1831 about half the goods brought down the Santa Fe Trail were slated for sale farther south in Mexico.

Most participants in the first years of the Santa Fe trade were individual males (though a few female investors were involved) who bought their own goods, transported them to New Mexico, and kept whatever profits they accrued. Traders often dabbled in the Indian and fur trades as well. As time passed, investment capital increased, while the proportion of proprietors decreased and the number of hired men grew. Profitability changed over time, too. In 1821 William Becknell realized a spectacular profit of nearly 800 percent, but markets eventually became saturated and profit margins declined. Profits ranged generally between 20 percent and 40 percent, though some
traders lost money because of oversupply of goods, poor timing and bad management, equipment and livestock problems, and occasional Indian raids.

Anglo Americans only briefly constituted a majority of Santa Fe traders. During the 1830s there were many more Hispanos than Anglo Americans, though most Hispanic traders handled small amounts of capital and goods. By 1840 numerous Hispanic merchants "ventured east to New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh, where they invested sizable assets." The Santa Fe trade succeeded because imports from the United States sold more cheaply than merchandise brought from Durango, Chihuahua, or elsewhere in Mexico, even after Mexican authorities assessed hefty duties on Americans' imported goods.

Effective trade regulation proved difficult for a variety of reasons. Bribery and corruption were commonplace, and more than a few New Mexican officials ignored laws in exchange for cold cash. Perennially unstable political conditions in Mexico enfeebled all efforts to control the trade, and one historian characterized New Mexican customs collection practices as "scandalously inefficient." American traders were equally eager to dodge the payment of duties. During the mid-1830s, Gov. Manuel Armijo set a five-hundred-dollar-fee for each wagon no matter what it carried. Armijo was apparently trying to simplify a complex customs collections system, but angry Americans resented his "arbitrary" impost. They clamored for restoration of the former ad valorem system, but they also devised a method to beat the tariff. By stuffing two or three tons of goods into very large wagons built at St. Louis or other towns, the gringos avoided paying about half the duties. Smuggling had always been part of life in colonial British and Spanish America, and it was widespread among New Mexicans and Americans. Profits from the contraband trade offered New Mexicans a way out of the debt-peonage that was common among the impoverished majority, but Americans smuggled mainly in order to maximize profits.

In purely economic terms, the Santa Fe trade offered more to New Mexico than to the United States. It boosted many New Mexicans' standard of living and brought new elements of technology, fashion, and the like to that isolated land. By the late 1830s New Mexicans could buy ready-made clothing from the eastern United States and even Europe, and such rarities as window glass, books, tools, and fancy items became readily available. It is fair to assert that substantial effects of the industrial revolution first appeared in New Mexico as a result of the Santa Fe trade. Some wealthy New Mexicans who correctly interpreted the social and political implications of the
growing trade elected to send their sons east to acquire an "American" education and learn the ways of the gringos. One rico sent his son off to school at St. Louis in 1841 with the advice that "the heretics are going to overrun all this country. Go and learn their language and come back prepared to defend your people."

Overland trade with Mexico via the Santa Fe Trail accounted for only a small fraction of U.S. foreign trade; it did not even constitute a great percentage of the American trade with Mexico. On the other hand, it certainly boosted the economies of western states such as Missouri and Arkansas. Missouri banks, especially, benefited from the influx of Mexican silver pesos. After the Panic of 1837 led to a major depression in the early 1840s, many Missouri banks remained solvent while wildcat banks elsewhere went bust by
the dozens. Likewise, the famous “Missouri mule” of the 1830s and 1840s originated in Mexico, not in the United States. Thousands of jacks and jennets made the trek from Santa Fe to be sold in Missouri markets. The Mexican trade also generated capital that was used to fuel other business ventures in Missouri and nearby states.

Many American fur trappers came to New Mexico over the Santa Fe Trail. Competition in the fur-rich Upper Missouri region, where a few large companies attempted to form monopolies or cartels to enrich themselves and hamstring competitors, was an important push factor in this process. Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain, having failed to crack the Upper Missouri trade, came to New Mexico in 1828 to trap furs and trade with Indians and Mexicans. By 1834 Bent, St. Vrain & Company—comprising four Bent brothers, Ceran St. Vrain, and his younger brother, Marcellin—hired New Mexican adobe experts to build Bent’s Fort on the north bank of the Arkansas River, the boundary between Mexico and the United States. After they negotiated their own 1839 cartel-style agreement with the powerful St. Louis–based Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company, Bent, St. Vrain & Company dominated the southern plains Indian bison-robe trade, and they also maintained profitable retail and wholesale stores at Santa Fe and Taos.

Between 1826 and 1830 American trappers scoured New Mexico, and several made forays to California to trap beavers and sea otters, trade or steal horses and mules, and explore the country. Ewing Young, a Tennessean who arrived in New Mexico in 1822, is the first man known to have trapped Arizona streams. In 1826 he secured a trapping license from New Mexico’s Gov. Antonio Narbona but, the next year, ran afoul of the new governor, Manuel Armijo, who jailed him and confiscated hundreds of beaver pelts. Two years later Young dodged further trouble by telling Mexican authorities he was headed for the United States, but once safely away he turned about and again trapped in Arizona. Mexican law required American trapping parties to hire some New Mexicans, but this demand did not prevent the illicit activities that aroused Mexican suspicions.

Most southwestern streams had been thoroughly trapped by 1830, but some mountain men remained in New Mexico. Taos was their usual residence because of its distance from probing officials at Santa Fe and its proximity to preferred mountain haunts. Exact numbers of expatriate mountain men are unknown, but at least 120 extranjeros (foreigners) are known to have either married or cohabited with New Mexican and Native American women during the Mexican era. An 1839 census listed thirty-four foreigners living in
New Mexico. In 1840, seven out of twenty-three Americans living at Taos had become Mexican citizens. Some embraced Catholicism (formally at least) and married New Mexican or Native American women. Among them were Charles Bent, Lucien Maxwell, and Kit Carson. A number of French Canadian and Louisiana men also wound up in New Mexico, a transition perhaps made easier because they were already nominal or practicing Catholics. Only three American women are known to have traveled to New Mexico on the old trail prior to 1850: Mary Donoho, who would operate a hotel in Santa Fe; Susan Shelby Magoffin, the wife of a well-known trader; and Marion Sloan Russell, who came to New Mexico as a child in 1849.

Involvement in the Santa Fe Trade and the fur trade placed Americans and Mexicans in close proximity and helped shape their attitudes about each other. But each group embraced cultural biases that predated Mexican Independence and the opening of the Santa Fe Trail. Most Americans practiced some form of Protestantism, whereas the vast majority of New Mexicans were Catholics. Centuries of interfaith strife and bloody warfare among European Christians had bred hatred and persistent stereotypes. Americans, whose religious views generally sprang from Anglican England, Presbyterian Scotland, or Puritan New England, viewed Catholics as "mere tools" of a "foreign power," meaning the Pope. According to this reasoning, Catholics could not be trusted to think or vote for themselves, which violated U.S. democratic-republican principles. Americans' antipathy toward Spain and Mexico stemmed also from la leyenda negra, the "Black Legend," a propagandistic diatribe developed by sixteenth-century Protestants. Drawing on Bartolomé de las Casas's critique of the Spanish Conquest published in 1552, Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias, the Legend cast Spaniards as ruthless and bloody-handed tyrants, in supposed contrast to the more benign practices of French, Dutch, or British conquerors and colonizers. The Black Legend had a long life; it continued to inform Americans' anti-Hispano attitudes until and beyond the Spanish-American War of 1898.

Catholics thought Protestants wrongheaded at best and dangerously apostate at worst. As well, seven centuries of the Iberian reconquista left Spanish Catholics with a deeply ingrained sense of their unique role in preserving and defending the Church in Rome. New Mexicans living on a raw frontier at the "rim of Christendom" had battled nature and man since 1600 to maintain and propagate their faith. Ironically, New Mexicans lived so far from diocesan headquarters in Durango that they received only about five visits from a bishop between 1600 and 1846. Despite general illiteracy, a shortage of priests,
and numerous unsanctified marriages within a populace unable to afford priests’ fees, their faith remained strong, and so did their suspicion of outsiders. New Mexicans had good reasons to mistrust the motives of some “American” traders and travelers.

Among the most threatening outsiders by 1840 were the tejanos, recent rebels against Mexico already famous for bluster and grandiose aspirations. In 1828 a Mexican artillery officer, José María Sánchez, described Anglo American tejanos as “lazy people of vicious character.” Technically, of course, “Texans” were not “Americans,” but many New Mexicans correctly understood that in actuality few distinctions marked the two and that the United States would likely annex Texas in the near future. Tensions escalated from 1841 to 1843, when tejano filibusters twice attempted, and twice failed, to invade New Mexico. An American soldier, Lt. Phillip St. George-Cooke, chased the Texan “border ruffians” away from New Mexico in 1843 but did not dispel New Mexicans’ fears that Americans and Texans—gringos all—operated in concert.

Josiah Gregg’s writing expressed some biases of los americanos. He considered New Mexico’s backwardness a legacy of Spanish and papal policy intended to “keep every avenue of knowledge closed... lest the lights of civil and religious liberty should reach them from their neighbors of the North.” Rural, impoverished New Mexico had no schools, but universities existed elsewhere in New Spain before the revolution, and Spain outspent the United States in funding Indian education programs. And despite the persistence of New Spain’s traditional system of racially determined castas (castes), most people living in the Mexican possessions found social acceptance and at least some measure of legal protection. This was not so in U.S. exclusionary society, where most blacks were slaves, free blacks were shunned, and Indians were accepted as neither citizens nor neighbors.

Gregg criticized New Mexicans’ literacy rates, medical practices, behavior, and general morality. He thought the architecture “clumsy,” especially the “poverty-stricken and shabby-looking houses of public worship,” yet he found the dwellings “extremely comfortable inside.” Gregg also discerned admirable characteristics among New Mexicans—they were generous, valiant, polite, and hardworking. Like other Americans, Gregg was ambivalent in judging New Mexico’s residents. New Mexican women particularly elicited ambiguous comments from American men, who found them at once alluring and repellent, immoral and saintly, decadent and upstanding. New Mexican women wore more revealing garments and were perhaps more outgoing than their Anglo American sisters; they also puffed corn-husk cigarillos,
rouged their cheeks with _alegría_ (a cosmetic derived from a plant called red coxcomb), and sipped _aguardiente_ (distilled liquor) at _fandangos_ (dances), all of which added to Americans' confusion over what to make of them.

One bigoted Anglo American mountaineer, Rufus Sage, declared upon meeting a party of New Mexican traders that "some of them were as black as veritable negroes, and needed only the curly hair, thick lips, and flattened nose, to define the genuine Congo in appearance. A more miserable looking gang of filthy half-naked, ragamuffins, I never before witnessed." Numerous "Mexicans" or "Spaniards," mostly from New Mexico, built and worked at fur posts from the Yellowstone to the Arkansas and were considered excellent horse breakers, mule packers, and herdsmen. Even Sage admitted that Mexicans who worked at trading posts "prove quite useful as horse-guards, and also in taking care of cattle and doing the drudgery connected with these establishments." Employment at trading posts offered New Mexicans a rare opportunity to earn cash if they managed to avoid overspending on goods at inflated trade-counter prices.

Burdened though they were with the baggage of ethnic stereotyping, some Mexicans, Americans, and Native Americans still discovered sufficient common ground for creating long-term associations of friendship, marriage, and commerce. Kit Carson's marriage to Josefa Jaramillo, like that of William Bent to two Cheyenne women, was based on genuine affection and must have required some degree of cultural accommodation. Historians, unfortunately, have discovered almost no evidence that reveals what Hispanic and Native American women may have thought about interethnic marriages. But we do know that the multiethnic and multilingual fur traders' society, which was more liberal minded than most Americans would tolerate, reflected two centuries of interethnic social and economic interaction. Success in the trade required that relations be reasonably amicable.

Kit Carson was in most respects a typical product of the American frontier. He was born in Kentucky on Christmas Eve, 1809, into a poor family that moved west several times. Kit never attended school regularly, but his formal education ended in 1824 when a falling tree killed his father, forcing the youngster to choose a trade. Kit apprenticed himself to a Franklin, Missouri, saddler named David Workman but found the work stultifying. Many fur hunters passed through the shop, however, and Kit developed an irrepressible urge to become a trapper, too. His older half brothers Moses and Andrew were already in the business, and Andrew joined George Champlain Sibley's government-funded Santa Fe Trail survey in 1825. In the same year, his master's
brother, William Workman, took the trail to Santa Fe. After one “distasteful” year in the saddlery shop, Kit ran off in 1826, and David Workman published a now famous reward in the *Missouri Intelligencer* offering one penny for the return of his wayward apprentice.

On his first western trip Carson traveled with William and Charles Bent. Within a few years, he developed a lasting and warm relationship with them and their partner, Ceran St. Vrain. In the meantime, Kit continued to Santa Fe, where he stayed briefly, and then spent the winter of 1826–1827 at Taos. Employed as a cook by an old friend of his father named Mathew Kincaid, Kit soaked up information about beaver trapping and began to learn Spanish. About this time, Carson first met padre Antonio José Martínez, the Taos priest who later became adamantly anti-American. By 1828 Carson had mastered the Spanish language and made a trip to Chihuahua as an interpreter for the Missouri merchant “Colonel” Phillip Trammell. At Chihuahua, Carson met Robert McKnight, who had been arrested by Spanish authorities in 1812 for attempting to trade at Santa Fe and spent nine years under “house arrest” in Mexico. Eventually becoming a Mexican citizen, McKnight grew wealthy operating a copper mine at Santa Rita in southern New Mexico. Carson worked at the mine for a few months and then joined a trapping expedition led by Ewing Young. Under Young’s expert tutelage, Carson honed the survival skills for which he was later famous. Young’s men trapped westward from New Mexico through Arizona and in 1829 reached Mission San Gabriel in California. While there, Carson and eleven other trappers volunteered to assist in recovering mission Indians who had run off. Carson and his cohorts trailed the escapees and attacked the village where they hid, killing “a great number of men” before returning the runaways to the mission.

For the next several years, Kit was a “free trapper,” hunting on his own hook, selling furs to the highest bidder, and reveling in the excitement of mountain life. In 1835, at the annual trappers’ rendezvous at Green River, Carson got into a scrape with a blustering French Canadian called “Shunar” (likely a corruption of Chouinard). This camp bully had already beaten several men and promised to thrash any American he met. Carson snatched a pistol, jumped on his horse, and rode out to confront Shunar. The two mounted men fired at the same instant: Shunar’s ball grazed Carson’s head, while Kit’s pistol ball shattered the Frenchman’s arm. Receiving wide circulation in a book published in 1840 by Samuel Parker, an Oregon-bound missionary, the encounter became an oft-told tale that boosted Carson’s reputation for reckless bravery and high-mindedness.
Kit's dealings with Native Americans ran the gamut from fighting to friendship to marriage. In 1835 Carson wed a young Arapaho woman named Waa­nibe (Singing Grass), whom he called “Alice.” Two children resulted from this marriage. Adaline, born about 1837, survived to adulthood, but another daughter, born in 1840, lived for only about three years. When Alice died around 1841, allegedly at Bent’s Fort, Kit temporarily placed his daughter Adaline with an unidentified Native woman and briefly held a job as hunter for the fort. One tradition has it that Carson then married a Cheyenne woman “of bad disposition,” though Carson family members firmly deny that the marriage took place. At any rate, Carson’s marriage to one or more Indian women according to the “custom of the country” was standard fur-trade practice. Some of these marriages were brief, lustful, or abusive, but others lasted a lifetime. Carson may have found it difficult to acknowledge his liaisons with Native American women. He mentioned no marriages to Indian women in his autobiography and avoided discussing them with female family members, though he apparently did with male relatives. There is also a tradition that Carson briefly cohabited with a New Mexican woman named Antonina Luna, formerly the consort of the famous mulatto trapper, Jim Beckwourth.

Kit Carson officially wed fifteen-year-old María Josefa Jaramillo at Taos on 6 February 1843; the marriage certificate bore padre Antonio José Martínez’s signature. When Carson was baptized a Catholic on 18 January 1842, he was still employed as a hunter for Bent’s Fort but probably had already begun to court Josefa. Her parents, Francisco Jaramillo and Apolonía Vigil, were members of prominent New Mexican families of the Río Arriba region. Josefa was born and resided for some time at Santa Cruz de la Cañada and later came into ownership of land near Fort Lyon as a result of her connection to Donaciano Vigil, one of the heirs of the gigantic Vigil–St. Vrain land grant of 1843. Kit and Josefa had eight children: Charles (1849–1851), William (1852–1889), Teresina (1855–1916), Christopher (1858–1929), Charles (1861–1938), Rebecca (1864–1885), Estefana (1866–1899), and Josephine (1868–1892). Also with the family at Taos was a daughter from Kit’s earlier marriage to Waa­nibe, but the child died in 1843 after falling into a boiling kettle of soap. In spring of 1842, while visiting relatives in Missouri, Kit had left his daughter Adaline with a sister to be cared for and educated. She eventually returned to live in New Mexico and then moved to California. Unlike Kit, brother-in-law Charles Bent never actually married María Ignacia Jaramillo and apparently had not legally acknowledged his children before he was killed in 1847 during the Taos Rebellion.
Carson's national fame did not originate with his trapping career. He might well have remained simply another obscure mountain man had it not been for Lt. John Charles Frémont, the self-promoting Pathfinder, who produced the first "road atlas" for western emigrants in the mid-1840s. Indeed,
but for sheer happenstance, a mountain man named Andrew Drips would have guided Frémont on his adventures. In 1842 Frémont sought out Drips on a steamer bound for the Upper Missouri and offered him the job. Drips was unavailable, for he had just been hired by the government to stifle the illegal liquor trade at fur trading posts between the Missouri and Platte Rivers, but Carson happened to be aboard the same vessel. Having recently visited St. Louis to see relatives and grown “tired of settlements,” Kit decided to take an Upper Missouri trip. His acceptance of Frémont’s offer inaugurated a long association with Frémont and his wife, Jessie, the daughter of Sen. Thomas Hart Benton, a powerful political ally and the greatest western “booster” of his time.

Kit Carson guided Frémont on three of his four expeditions, participated in the American takeover of California, and carried war dispatches back east three times. In 1848 Kit brought Washington, D.C., some of the first reliable information regarding the California gold strike. When Jessie Benton Frémont edited her husband’s journals for publication, she gave Carson a prominent role that launched his national celebrity. Carson and Frémont endured many hardships together, saved each other’s lives more than once, and developed an abiding mutual loyalty. The two men deeply admired, even loved, each other. Carson’s allegiance to Frémont probably sharpened his sense of duty, and he usually found it impossible to ignore other military officers’ appeals to that obligation later in his life.

Carson’s travels with Frémont provide examples illustrating good and bad qualities of character. In April 1843, during the second expedition, the party encountered two Mexicans, a man and a boy, about one hundred miles east of El Pueblo de Los Angeles. Indians had ambushed the party of four men and two women driving a horse herd, forcing the two to abandon their companions as they tried to save the livestock. Leaving the herd at a spring, the Mexicans searched for help and stumbled into Frémont’s camp. Kit Carson and Alexander Godey volunteered to help Andreas Fuentes recover his lost horses and search for survivors. Fuentes’s jaded horse soon gave out, but Carson and Godey continued the pursuit, found the horse thieves, killed two of them, and returned with some of the stolen stock but no survivors. Two scalps dangled from Godey’s gun when the two rode into camp. In Frémont’s view, Carson and Godey had heroically risked their lives not for personal gain but simply to “punish the robbers of the desert, and to avenge the wrongs of Mexicans whom they did not know.” Frémont’s bilious and hypercritical German cartographer, Charles Preuss, saw the event in a different light. Carson
and Godey, Preuss wrote, had “shot the Indians [while] creeping up on them from behind,” and he was disgusted that they had taken the dead men’s “entire scalps” instead of “only a piece . . . as large as a dollar” as the “more noble Indian” would.

In the spring of 1846 the men of Frémont’s third expedition were encamped at Peter Lawson’s ranch on the Sacramento River, not far from Mount Shasta, waiting for war to break out with Mexico. Early in April, Carson and most of Frémont’s men joined American settlers in a preemptive strike against a large Indian encampment that they believed was preparing to attack them. Carson described the fight that left more than 175 Indians dead as a “perfect butchery” and thought the “chastisement” would prevent the Indians from “attacking the settlements.” Even Harvey L. Carter, a sympathetic Carson biographer, concluded it was “doubtful that such a preventive expedition was justified.”

In May 1846, Carson and the others were bivouacked in northern California when Lt. Archibald Gillespie, U.S. Marines, arrived with news that the war with Mexico had begun and orders for Frémont to return south. The Pathfinder read dispatches until past midnight and then rolled into his blankets by the fire. A while later Klamath Indians crept into camp, killed two men with axes, and were about to finish off the rest when Carson awoke and alerted the camp to danger. In the melee that followed, one more of Frémont’s men—a Delaware Indian named Crane—died. The attackers were repulsed, but the Klamaths and Frémont’s party continued skirmishing for several days.

Another incident that might have tarnished Carson’s reputation occurred in July 1846 when he participated in the killing of three Mexican Californians whom Frémont said were spies. Lieutenant Gillespie later claimed the three were murdered in cold blood, but Frémont retorted that the act was a retaliation, for Mexicans had killed two of his men, adding that “mainly Delawares” had done the deed. Edward M. Kern, an artist with the expedition, believed the killings resulted because the murder of the two Americans had “produced an order [from Frémont] to take no more prisoners.” Modern-day defenders of Carson have argued that Frémont’s small company was in a dangerously exposed situation and had already lost men, so wartime exigencies justified the killings. Still, the event reflects little in the way of compassion or high-mindedness.

It is certainly true that Kit Carson killed Indians, possibly as many as twenty-five or more. Much of his repute as an “Indian killer” resulted from the many outrageous fabrications of his adventures appearing in dozens of dime novels during and after his life. These tales helped create the mythic
Carson, and that myth has crept into historical studies of the man, too. But it is also quite true that violence was part and parcel of Indian life on the plains and in the mountains. Bitter intertribal animosity and bloodshed were common, fueled by traditional hatreds, horse thefts, kidnappings and murders, territorial squabbling, and competition for economic resources such as game or access to fur traders. American trappers had to be prepared for violence if they were to survive in that environment, and like other frontier-dwelling Americans, they were not noted for their pacific temperaments. Throughout the Rocky Mountain fur trade era (roughly 1820 to 1850) hundreds of Indians as well as Euro-Americans met violent deaths. The close-knit trappers' fraternity, ignoring that they were basically illegal intruders in “Indian country,” harbored intense loathing for any Indians whom they considered responsible for killing their comrades.

In Native warfare, the killing of a member of one tribe called for retribution against any member of the offending nation. This applied to “Americans,” too. If a tribe lost someone at the hands of a trapper, then any trapper was fair game, even if he had no connection to the previous offense. Most Native American nations embraced this rule, and American mountain men adopted it to some degree; survival demanded it. Trappers rarely murdered Indians for entertainment or to exterminate them, unlike American miners in gold rush California, who routinely killed Indians simply to be rid of them.

Carson's violent behavior toward Indians was based on the principle of “retributive justice,” which resembles the ancient Babylonian Code of Hammurabi requiring “an eye for an eye.” In practice, this meant that any injury done by an Indian to a White man must be revenged, lest Indians find that killing a White man brought no reprisal. Much violence between trappers and Indians resulted from the theft of horses, pelts, or trade goods, all of which the trappers deemed vital to their survival and economic success.

Trappers in the Southwest frequently clashed with Natives. Jedediah S. Smith, a famous trapper and explorer, lost more than a dozen men in a fight with Mohaves while attempting to cross the Colorado River on his way to California in 1827 and was himself killed by Comanches while en route to Santa Fe in 1831. American trappers who followed Smith's trail to the Spanish missions—as Carson did in 1829—kept a close eye out for Mohaves and Apaches and were liable to kill those they encountered. Ethnic hostility was sadly characteristic among most nineteenth-century southwestern residents.

Besides trapping and scouting, Kit found other things to do. In 1853 Carson, John Hatcher, and Lucien Maxwell drove several thousand sheep
over the Old Spanish Trail for sale to the multitude of gold miners in California. Hispanic New Mexicans had first moved sheep to California back in 1828, but the Americans jumped at the opportunity to make profits out of the west coast’s meat shortage. From 1854 to 1861 Carson also served as an Indian agent in New Mexico for the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Ute, Apache, and Navajo nations and earned a reputation for fair dealing.

When the Civil War came to New Mexico, he resigned his civilian position to command the First New Mexican Volunteer Regiment, which helped repel Gen. Henry H. Sibley’s Texan-Confederate invasion. His regiment performed well during the February 1862 battle at Valverde near Fort Craig. In October he led an expedition against Mescalero Apaches, who had taken advantage of the Civil War to step up their raids on New Mexican settlements. After a brief and successful campaign, the army forcibly moved the Mescaleros to a new home at the Bosque Redondo in eastern New Mexico.

Navajo raids had likewise increased. Gen. Edward R. S. Canby decided to undertake a campaign against the Navajos late in 1861. He believed that “there is now no choice between their absolute extermination or their removal and colonization” far from their ancestral homeland west of the Río Grande. Canby was soon transferred back east, leaving his successor, Gen. James H. Carleton, to put the plan in motion. General Carleton had led his “California Column” into New Mexico too late to help defeat Sibley’s Confederates, but his new orders called for commencing the Navajo Campaign. Carson, who had no role in planning the campaign, would be ordered to lead soldiers to the Navajo country, force their surrender, and take them, too, to the experimental “reservation” at the Bosque Redondo on the edge of the buffalo plains.

Most modern critics who label Kit Carson an Indian killer focus almost exclusively on his role in the army’s campaign in 1864 against the Navajos. Unhappily, the Navajo nation posed a serious security threat to many New Mexico inhabitants—Natives and non-Natives alike. Canby’s plan, reflecting the army’s response to demands for action from New Mexico citizens, aimed to remedy a long-standing problem: the practically ceaseless rounds of raid and counterraid that had disrupted life in the province for more than a century. Hundreds of Hispanic settlers and Pueblo Indians, as well as Navajos, had been killed, injured, or captured over the decades since the end of the Spanish regime and through the Mexican era.

Carson was reluctant to undertake this operation. Josefa was pregnant again, though Kit had only rarely seen her or their children during the pre-
vious two years. Past his fifty-fifth birthday, Carson could no longer overlook the ill effects of his 1860 accident. He repeatedly submitted his resignation only to be talked out of doing so, for he was still under army authority after the failed Confederate invasion, and he felt compelled to serve. Most other officers saw him as uniquely qualified for the task, though he probably would have preferred an easier job with the army, for he was thinking of retirement.

Obviously, Carson did not capture thousands of "hostile" Navajos by himself. Success and, more importantly in some respects, the historical legacy of the campaign would depend upon the forgotten officers and enlisted men who carried it out. The sad truth is that most of the men in Carson's command were no advertisement for military excellence. A rough lot overall, more than a few were alcoholics, some were bigots, some were embezzlers, a few were murderers, and the Californians generally got on badly with Kit's
New Mexicans. By the campaign’s end, the army had cashiered almost half of the participating officers. One lieutenant was thrown out after being caught drunk and in bed with an enlisted man; another was discharged after being found drunk and in bed with a woman “of bad character.”

Kit Carson’s involvement effectively began in July 1863, when he led about 340 soldiers from Los Lunas to Fort Wingate and the Navajo country. His Ute scouts found Navajos, killing some and capturing others, whom they refused to give up for removal to the Bosque. Disciplinary problems with soldiers and officers included insubordination, drunken scuffles, and the killing of Navajos. In January 1864 Carson led his troops out of Fort Canby to search for “hostiles” in the reputed Navajo “stronghold” at Canyon de Chelly, a mysterious place rarely visited by non-Natives. In the following weeks, according to official reports, twenty-three Navajos were “killed” (none by Carson), while 234 were “surrendered” or were “captured.”

Carson’s role in the Navajo Campaign was a limited one. He did not originate the plan, and although he did not fully approve of it, he performed what he saw as his duty. Neither Carson nor any of his subordinate officers destroyed the Navajo peach orchards, though he basically approved of the army’s “scorched earth” policy. The fruit trees were cut down by Capt. John Thompson months later, in July-August 1864, by which time Carson had been reassigned as a supervisor at the Bosque Redondo.

Navajo casualties mounted rapidly, however, as more and more surrendered at Fort Canby and then waited at Fort Wingate for relocation hundreds of miles away at the Bosque Redondo. Under guard, several large contingents of Navajo prisoners made their way east past Albuquerque and on to Fort Sumner. Among one group numbering about 2,500 at Fort Canby, almost 130 died before leaving in March 1864, and another 200 perished from exposure or were killed by vengeance-seeking New Mexicans while en route.

Isolation, despair, and death stalked the penned-up Navajos at the Bosque Redondo. A major contributing factor was that the army had grossly underestimated the total number of Navajos, and it failed to furnish sufficient rations for those incarcerated. The army supposed there were no more than about five thousand Navajos, so when eight thousand surrendered (out of nearly twelve thousand), the army simply called off further campaigning. Several thousand Navajos remained in the Canyon de Chelly to face starvation under fearful winter conditions. Department of Interior officials, legally empowered to oversee Indian affairs, refused to fund supplies for the reservation “experiment” because they thought it unwise for the army to house
tradiotional enemies, Navajos and Mescalero Apaches, at the Bosque Redondo. Consequently, the army purchased food and supplies, but never in sufficient quantities. Crops failed, the water was polluted, and a government program designed to transform Navajos into "American-style" farmers did not succeed. Carson had nothing to do with these problems, nor did he play a prominent role in the "Long Walk." He was ordered to go to the Bosque to help out but served only intermittently, quitting in disgust by September 1864.

Perhaps Carson’s reactions to another infamous military campaign of 1864 can shed light on whether he merits consideration as a genocidal killer. In November of that year a contingent of Colorado volunteers accompanied Col. John M. Chivington on a search-and-destroy mission against Black Kettle’s Cheyenne camp at Sand Creek. Black Kettle had never made war on the United States. In front of his lodge fluttered an American flag and a white flag, which he expected would prevent an attack. Young warriors over whom he had no control, however, had recently killed White settlers on the Colorado plains, and the summer of 1864 saw many skirmishes between Indians and Whites. Chivington’s raiders devastated the camp, killing and horribly mutilating men, women, and children. Just before Christmas, the soldiers returned to Denver, where they displayed dozens of grisly trophies to admiring crowds.

Chivington, likely influenced by reading dime novels about Carson, boasted that he had "eclipsed . . . Carson, and posterity will speak of me as the great Indian fighter." Carson expressed only contempt for "that dog Chivington," as he labeled the former Methodist preacher more than once, and he offered a congressional investigating committee damning testimony regarding the Sand Creek attack. Carson was no Indian hater, but he embraced a prevailing American notion that predicted the disappearance of the Native people. He once said, "I’ve seen as much of ‘em as any white man livin,’ and I can’t help but pity ‘em. They’ll all soon be gone, anyhow.”

Among modern Carson scholars, Harvey L. Carter devoted the most care to defining his man’s character. Carter concluded that Kit Carson did not develop “in any marked degree, the characteristic of leadership” until he became a soldier in 1861. By then his self-confidence was at a high level, and his reputation offered a credible source of authority. Like practically all mountain men, Kit was highly individualistic, but he was neither overly aggressive nor ambitious. By contrast, his friends Charles and William Bent, Lucien B. Maxwell, and Ceran St. Vrain all ardently pursued financial and political success. Carson also lacked the flamboyant personality that made his fellow
trappers John L. Hatcher and Joe Meek so memorable. On the other hand, he was impetuous and sometimes showed poor judgment in risk taking, especially as a young man. Almost all contemporaries who wrote about him portrayed him as a decent man: honest, steadfast, and unassuming.

Kit Carson’s friends knew that his inability to read or write caused him considerable embarrassment. Barely able to scrawl his name, he had to request others to read and write his letters. After the Civil War he briefly commanded a few forts but was hampered by illiteracy and inadequate bookkeeping skills. Carson had no head for business, and he had to answer more than once to charges of financial mismanagement, though he was never found guilty. Like many trappers, Kit’s speech strongly reflected his backwoods upbringing: the use of bar for bear, whar for where, fit for fought, and the like persisted throughout his life. One Taos associate, Tom Tobin, recalled that Kit “never swore more’n was necessary.” Kit’s illiteracy required dependence on his memory, which contemporaries said was remarkably good. This faculty helped him learn Spanish, develop a working vocabulary in several Indian languages, and master the sign language of Plains Indians.

The “real” Carson was in essence an illiterate backwoodsman who possessed a special knack for survival in tough circumstances, an average man caught up in extraordinary events. What made him famous was a combination of the sincere admiration of friends who publicized his exploits and an early version of the “media blitz” in the form of inexpensive, sensationalized dime novels. In actuality, there are two Kit Carsons, one historical, the other a media creation, and these incompatible realities diverged. As a result of the many portrayals of Carson in books, movies, and television, by the late twentieth century the iconic Carson became more important in the public’s imagination than the real one.

Kit Carson and men like him, despite limited education, cultural biases, and human failings, exerted real influence over the destiny of New Mexico. Some of them, undoubtedly, had little idea that they were key pawns in a geopolitical contest of continental dimensions. A few traders, however, definitely aspired to power in New Mexico. Such a man was Charles Bent, who married a Hispanic woman, spent almost twenty years in New Mexico making money and building political support, and was named the first American territorial governor, only to be killed a few months later in the Taos Rebellion of 1847.

Charles Bent’s and padre Martínez’s well-documented mutual hatred produced several acts of violence in Taos mainly perpetrated by their respective
supporters. Such social unrest exacerbated political and interethnic tensions in New Mexico before the war began in 1846 and resulted in major administrative changes in the territory after Bent's death. Perhaps even, the Bent-Martinez relationship played a significant role in engendering a negative tone for American public opinion on New Mexico that helps account for its sixty-five years of territorial limbo. From a historical viewpoint, these two men had a far more direct impact on New Mexico's future than Kit Carson. But relatively few people outside New Mexico have ever heard of Martinez or Bent, whereas Carson achieved world renown. This notoriety, over which the real Kit Carson had no control and in which he showed little interest, eventually coalesced into a pseudohistorical icon of great symbolic resonance. Carson's name conjures up images in many Americans' minds—irrespective of whether those images correspond with historical reality or not. More than any historical aspect of Carson's life, the powerful resonance of his mythic life explains why he has been recruited many times over the years to symbolize positive or negative aspects of our national character.

Essay on Sources

Readers interested in Kit Carson may want to begin by consulting his autobiography, *Kit Carson's Own Story of His Life*, Blanche C. Grant, ed. (Taos, N.Mex.: Kit Carson Memorial Foundation, 1926). The first biography to be published was DeWitt C. Peters, *The Life and Adventures of Kit Carson, the Nestor of the Rocky Mountains* (New York: Clark & Meeker, 1858). Reprinted several times, it contains a good deal of romanticized nonsense. Several later Carson biographies offer more credible details and reasoned analysis. Harvey Lewis Carter's *Dear Old Kit: The Historical Kit Carson* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968) provides solid annotations for Carson's autobiography and includes a useful reappraisal of the man. Less reliable is M. Morgan Estergreen's *Kit Carson: A Portrait in Courage* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), which includes demonstrably false information about Carson as well as other errors. A highly positive appraisal and generally reliable data appear in George Brewerton's *Overland with Kit Carson: A Narrative of the Old Spanish Trail in '48* (1930; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1993).

The first Carson biography to include documents related to the Navajo Campaign was Edwin Legrand Sabin's *Kit Carson Days, 1809–1868: Adventures in the Path of Empire*, 2 vols. (1935; reprint, with an introduction by


For women on the trail, see Stella N. Drumm, ed., Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin (1927; reprint,