The Unique Legacy of Abraham Lincoln in New Mexico

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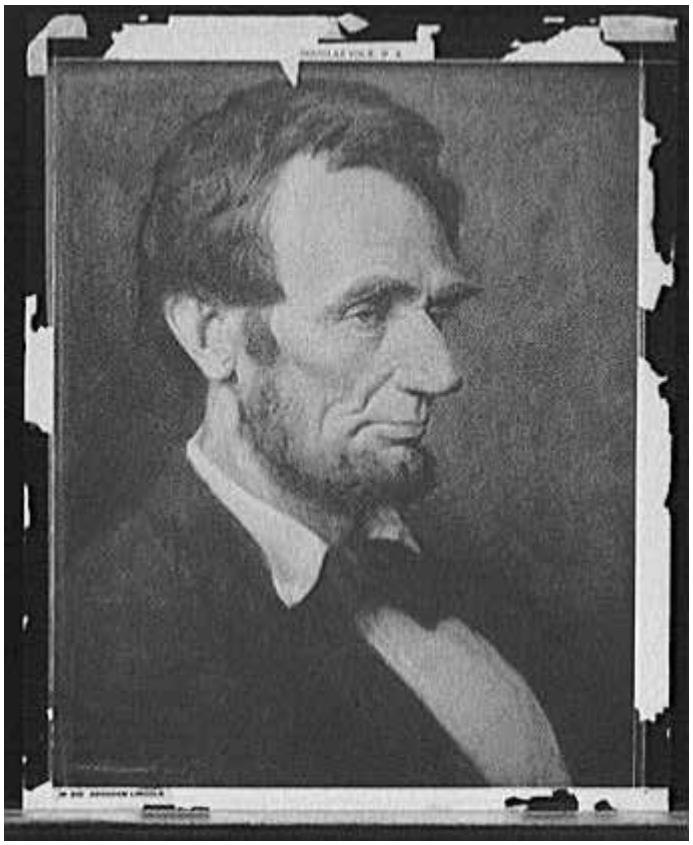

Abraham Lincoln, ca. 1861,
Courtesy of the U.S. Library of Congress

Las Cruces Museums' Branigan Cultural Center was one of only forty museums in the country chosen in 2009 to host a traveling exhibit presented by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum marking the 200th anniversary of his birth. As part of this exhibit, the museum put together a series of panels showing the relationships between Lincoln and New Mexico. Christopher Schurtz, M.A., was the lead researcher for this exhibit.

Few American presidents had more of a singular impact on New Mexico than Abraham Lincoln. His impressions of New Mexico as a place are unclear, if he indeed had any. As one of the most well documented presidents in history, Lincoln left behind only a few sparse mentions of New Mexico, and that was within the ongoing debate about extending slavery into the western territories once they became states, which he firmly opposed. In short, he spoke or wrote very little about what was to many in Washington just a vast, sparsely populated, far western territory.

Yet during his presidency, two different wars were fought on its soil, and the territory lost half of its landmass. Lincoln signed into law legislation that years after his death would aid the settlement and development of New Mexico. He has a county, a town, a range of mountains and a national forest named in his honor. And New Mexico's Pueblo tribes still make use of ceremonial canes he presented them a century and a half ago. No other U.S. president can claim such a lasting and unique legacy in New Mexico.

The Civil War (1861-1862)

The event that so defined Lincoln's presidency, the Civil War, also played out in New Mexico, the furthest west the war ever got. Between July 1861 and March 1862, there were two major battles fought in central and northern New Mexico, a shameful surrender of Union troops near Las Cruces, and a dozen skirmishes between approximately 3,500 Confederates and 5,000 Union soldiers. Confederate forces mostly dominated the battlefield, but ultimately lack of supplies and support led to their retreat entirely from the territory by May 1862.[1]

In the months before war began, the New Mexico Territory was a pawn in a last-ditch Congressional chess game to avert war.[2] New Mexico was an important part of a compromise proposal to avert the secession of the South. Known as the Crittenden Compromise, after Kentucky senator John J. Crittenden, it would have allowed territories south of the Missouri Compromise line, including all of New Mexico, to become a slave state if they so chose.[3]

As president-elect, and true to the Republican Party platform, Lincoln wrote congressional leaders

voicing his opposition to any extension of slavery.[4] In a letter dated 1 February 1861 to his future Secretary of State William H. Seward, Lincoln wrote: "I say now, however, as I have all the while said, that on the territorial question–that is, the question of extending slavery under the national auspices,– I am inflexible. I am for no compromise which assists or permits the extension of the institution on soil owned by the nation. And any trick by which the nation is to acquire territory, and then allow some local authority to spread slavery over it, is as obnoxious as any other."[5] The compromise was roundly defeated in Congress, but by April, with the secession of the rest of the southern states, the time for compromise had passed.

Just three months after the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter on 6 April 1861, and just days after Southern troops routed Union forces at the First Battle of Bull Run near Washington D.C. on 21 July, the war began in New Mexico. And like the war back east, it began with an embarrassing route of Union troops.

Confederate leaders envisioned New Mexico as the first step in an ambitious plan of a southwestern Confederate territory extending to the Pacific Ocean. This would have provided a vital ocean route for the South, as well as access to Colorado and California minerals.[6]

The Confederates did have some support in southern New Mexico, but most native New Mexicans backed the Union, or at least, were ambivalent.[7] Several Confederate soldiers and officers had served in the U.S. Army of New Mexico, but very few native New Mexicans joined the mostly Texan troops that made up the Confederate New Mexico Army. New Mexico Territorial Governor Henry Connelly, a Lincoln appointee, urged New Mexicans to resist, saying in a proclamation published September 1861 in English and Spanish that the South's "…long smothered vengeance against our Territory and people, they now seek to gratify…You cannot, you must not, hesitate to take up arms in defense of your homes, firesides, and families."

Confederate forces soundly won the earliest engagements in New Mexico. In late July 1861 three hundred Texas troops led by Confederate Col. John Baylor made their way from Ft. Bliss to Mesilla.[8] Approximately seven hundred Union troops stationed at nearby Ft. Fillmore, under the command of Maj. Isaac Lynde, fled the fort without firing a shot, and were eventually captured, many of them exhausted, drunk and dehydrated, near San Augustine Springs.[9] Baylor named Mesilla as the capital of the new Confederate Territory of Arizona.[10]

By January 1862, Confederate Gen. Henry Sibley and his 2,600-man Texas brigade was marching up the Mesilla Valley toward Fort Craig, located about fifteen miles south of the present city of Socorro, to confront 3,800 Union forces led by then U.S Col. Edward S. Canby (who happened to be Sibley's brother-in-law).[11]

On 21 February 1862, Confederate and Union forces, including a New Mexico Volunteer regiment led by Christopher "Kit" Carson, clashed near Valverde east of Fort Craig, in an open field set between the towering Black Mesa and the Rio Grande. The Battle of Valverde raged for hours before Confederates got the upper hand with the taking of a key battery, forcing Union forces to retreat to Fort Craig across the river. But the marching and fighting had depleted Sibley's supplies, and rather than attack Fort Craig, Sibley chose to bypass the fort and head north.[12]

By the end of February, with Union forces abandoning forts and towns, Sibley's forces had taken Albuquerque and the Confederate flag was flying in the territorial capital of Santa Fe. But the golden age of Confederate rule of New Mexico was short-lived. On 26 March 1862 Union forces from Colorado and northern New Mexico, prevailed in a small battle of Apache Canyon near Santa Fe. Two days later on 28 May, and just a few miles south, the majority of all the troops on both sides met in a wide mountain pass northeast of Santa Fe.

Later referred to as "The Gettysburg of the West," the Battle of Glorieta Pass was the decisive battle of the New Mexico campaign. Most historians believe the Confederates won the battle itself.[13] But while the Confederates held the field at the end of battle, Union

"The Battle of Glorieta Pass," by Roy Anderson. Courtesy Glorieta Museum at Pecos National Park.

Col. John Chivington, guided by New Mexican lieutenant colonel Manuel Chavez, flanked the Confederate line and led a sneak attack on the Confederates supply wagons. This proved a crucial final blow to Sibley's campaign. Along with the arrival that month of the California Column led by Gen. James Carleton, the Confederate Army of New Mexico was forced to flee south to Texas, never to return.[14]

An estimated eight hundred Union and Confederate soldiers were killed or died of disease in the Civil War in New Mexico, with twice as many wounded or reported missing.[15] After enduring a grueling march back to Texas, most of the Confederate troops went on to fight elsewhere in the war, while Union troops led by U.S. Brig. Gen. James Carleton would focus on subduing the Apache and Navajo in New Mexico. It is unknown to what extent Lincoln, mourning the recent death of his son Willie and otherwise consumed with the escalating war, was aware of his army's success in New Mexico, although it was noted in the Congressional Record.

The Indian Wars in the New Mexico Territory

As the War of Rebellion threatened to tear the Union apart, Abraham Lincoln seemed determined to show he could fight two wars. Across the West, U.S. troops enforced Lincoln's Indian policy, which generally supported the removal of American Indians from their traditional homelands.[16]

Previous presidents, as well as the Republican Party, favored an aggressive approach in the settlement of the West, and part of that was taking a hard line against native tribes. Lincoln apparently supported his generals in the West in their actions against what were considered as hostile Indians by most Americans. Even as criticism of Gen. Carleton's military-style rule in New Mexico and his poor treatment of the Navajo and Apache increased in 1864, Lincoln rejected calls for his removal.[17]

Carleton waged an unapologetic scorched earth campaign against both the Apache and Navajo, some of who had launched their own violent raids of New Mexican settlements for years. Lincoln, through his Secretary of State William Seward, supported Carleton's plan—or at least they did not object—to crush both nomadic tribes and place them on a single reservation.[18]

Kit Carson led small forces of troops into Navajo territory, and by early 1864 forced the surrender of thousands of starving, beaten Navajos. Most were gathered at Fort Defiance and then marched in groups for hundreds of miles east, with little food or water, to the Bosque Redondo reservation near Fort Sumner. More than five hundred of the nine thousand Navajos who made the trip between 1864 and 1865 died en route.[19] The Navajo memory of what they still call "The Long Walk" remains strong in oral traditions.

The Navajos joined hundreds of Mescalero Apaches, their traditional rivals and adversaries, who had arrived first. Living conditions there were very poor, and most attempts to grow edible crops failed due to insect infestations and brackish water. Within a couple years, the Apaches had left the reservation for southern New Mexico, and in 1868, the Navajos were allowed to return to their traditional homelands in the Four Corners area.

Despite the merciless approach taken against the Navajos and Apaches, Lincoln took a much more benevolent tact with the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico. For centuries, the governments of New Spain and later Mexico offered ceremonial canes to the governors of the Pueblos. In recognition of the neutrality of the Pueblo tribes, Lincoln arranged to have ceremonial canes made for all of New Mexico's Pueblo governors. Capped in silver and inscribed with his signature, the "Lincoln canes" are still used today in transfer of power ceremonies.[20]

Legacy of Lincoln: The Acts that Changed New Mexico

Abraham Lincoln signed into law bills that still have an impact today. While he does not deserve credit for writing or sponsoring the legislation, it was his signature as president that turned them into law (previous presidents had vetoed similar bills). The most noteworthy of these brought to New Mexico the first railroads, new homesteaders from the east, and its only agricultural college. All of these were realized years after Lincoln's death.

From the time California became a state in 1849, the need existed for efficient transportation to link it with the east. Few issues were more politicized than the idea of a transcontinental railroad, and debate raged for years as to the most favored route. Northern power interests favored a route north of Colorado, while southerners favored a route through New Mexico. This southern route gained strong support from the future Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who as a former secretary of

war backed the acquisition of a narrow, flat strip of land in what is now southern New Mexico, which eventually led to the Gadsden Purchase in 1854.[21]

Despite the $10 million land buy, the route was far from settled. When Lincoln signed the Pacific Railway Act on 1 July 1862, the southern route had lost all support in Congress. The second transcontinental railroad did eventually materialize in New Mexico, with the connection of the Southern Pacific and Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe lines in the newly created town of Deming in March 1881.

Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad arrives near Glorieta Summit, ca. 1880. Courtsey Ben Wittick Collection, Museum of New Mexico.

Lincoln also signed into law the first Homestead Act and the Morrill Land Grant Act in May 1862. Both of these laws took a generation and several revisions before they were implemented and felt in New Mexico. The Morrill Land Grant Act provided federal land to states to establish at least one college focused on mechanic arts and agriculture (military science was added later). A second Morrill Act was approved twenty years later, which then enabled New Mexico in 1889 to establish its only land grant college in Las Cruces, now known as New Mexico State University.

After years of failed attempts in Congress, southern obstructionism, and at least one presidential veto, Lincoln signed the first western Homestead Act into law on 20 May 1862. The act provided 160 acres of federal land to any settler able to live on and improve the land within five years. Along with the railroad, the Homestead Act indeed did lead to a mass influx of mostly Anglo settlers and land speculators from the east. Like the Morrill Act before, it took many years and a revision to the original law before New Mexicans could implement it. In the Expanded Homestead Act in 1909, the amount of free land was doubled, making ranching more viable in western territories like New Mexico

Patronage and Lincoln on New Mexcio

Abraham Lincoln's words on New Mexico are very few, and those mostly come from speeches he gave as a candidate in 1859 and 1860 addressing extending slavery into the far west territories. Lincoln had opposed the War with Mexico in 1846, and the annexation of what was then still northern Mexico. Lincoln was adamantly opposed to extending slavery further into the west.

Lincoln's most direct influence on New Mexico arguably came through his appointments. As president, Lincoln also had the duty to appoint various territorial offices, primarily governor and federal judges. Historians generally believe Lincoln and others in Washington paid scant attention to the territory and mostly neglected it.[22] In later years, as the war dragged on, Lincoln delegated appointment decisions to territorial representatives with Republican sympathies, but in several cases, he took an active role and chose people with long ties to New Mexico.

Sometimes, that meant going outside his party. In 1861, Lincoln appointed a Democrat, Henry Connelly, a former slave owner from Virginia and long-time resident and politician in New Mexico, to serve as governor. He initially chose as territorial secretary Miguel Otero, also a Democrat and congressional delegate who was married to a Southern belle.

Otero was a behind-the-scenes supporter of New Mexico's slave code of 1859, which formally allowed African-American slavery in New Mexico for the first time (though the slavery of Native-Americans had occurred for centuries, and continued until outlawed in 1867). Congress ultimately rejected Otero's nomination.[23]

Lincoln stood by his military appointee in New Mexico Gen. James Carleton, even when criticism in New Mexico grew of his handling of Indian affairs, and his harsh punishment of people he believed were Southern sympathizers. He also refused to remove Kirby Benedict, an old law friend from Illinois, from his seat as Chief Justice of the New Mexico Territorial Supreme Court, despite Benedict's sometimes bizarre behavior and heavy drinking.[24]

As the war dragged on, Lincoln took less and

less of an active role in New Mexico's territorial appointments, with political appointments suggested by territorial or congressional representatives becoming more common by the end of his presidency.

The Map of New Mexcio

The borders of New Mexico changed dramatically during the Lincoln years. When Lincoln became president in March 1861, New Mexico still stretched from West Texas to California. But Lincoln's pen would change that.

The debate over extending slavery into the western territories stalled all efforts to create a separate Arizona territory, an idea proposed since the early 1850s.[25] That hurdle was cleared with southern secession. On 24 February 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law the creation of the Territory of Arizona, and with that New Mexico lost half of its land mass.

For a brief time under the Confederates, the main border of New Mexico and Arizona ran east-to-west, with the northern line near Socorro, rather than north-to-south.[26] During the first year of the Civil War, occupying Confederate forces claimed the southern half of New Mexico and Arizona as the Confederate Territory of Arizona, with Mesilla as its capital. Those borders did not last, as Congress and Lincoln approved in 1863 the current borders of New Mexico and Arizona.

Lincoln's name continued to influence the map of New Mexico. In 1870 there was an attempt in Congress to rename New Mexico for the fallen president, but it never got out of committee.[27] In 1869 the New Mexico Territorial Legislature created Lincoln County out of the southeastern part of the territory, naming the new town of Lincoln the county seat.

A national forest, range of mountains, and several streets in New Mexico are also named in Lincoln's honor. And in the late 1870s, his name was linked to another "war" in Lincoln County, which spawned the West's most infamous outlaw, Billy the Kid.

Endnotes

1 Robert Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood* (University of New Mexico Press, 1968); William Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico, 1846-1868* (University of New Mexico Press, 1952); and Warren Beck, *New Mexico: A History of Four Centuries* (University of Oklahoma Press), 1962.

2 Mark Stegmaier, "An Imaginary Negro in an Impossible Place: The Issue of New Mexico Statehood in the Secession," *New Mexico Historical Review* (October 2000): 284.

3 Crittenden had two sons who served as major generals in the war: one for the North, the other for the South.

4 Stegmaier, "An Imaginary Negro," 266. Lincoln's position on New Mexico reflected the Republican Party platform of 1860, which allowed for no compromise on the extension of slavery.

5 Roy P. Basler, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*,Vol. 2 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953).

6 Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood*, 84; Beck, *New Mexico*, 150; and Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*. Though Confederate leaders in New Mexico continued to push this scheme once war began, Jefferson Davis rejected the proposal by early 1862 as too far-flung given the South's resources.

7 Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood*, 85; Beck, *New Mexico*, 155. Also Jacqueline D. Meketa, *Legacy of Honor: The Life of Rafael Chacon, a Nineteenth-Century New Mexican* (University of New Mexico Press, 1986).

8 A year prior a convention of secessionists had met in Mesilla and declared it the capital of a future Confederate territory.

9 *Mesilla Times*, "War At Home, Battle of Mesilla! Arizona is Free At Last!" Microfilm of the Mesilla Times, Roll 1. NMSU Branson Library Collection. Also descriptions by Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*. Beck, *New Mexico*, and James Cooper McKee, *Narrative of the Surrender of a Command of U.S Forces at Fort Fillmore, N.M.* (New York. January 1881.)

10 In February, Baylor wrote a colleague, saying "So far, Mr. Lincoln is not making much headway in suppressing the rebellion. He has got himself thrashed at every fight from Manassas to Mesilla, and today we dare them to attack us at any point." Quoted in Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*, 143.

11 Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*, 167; Beck, *New Mexico*, 156. A veteran of the Mexican War who had recently fought Indian tribes in New Mexico, Sibley was also known for inventing the conical-shaped "Sibley Stove," which both Union and Confederate armies used throughout the war.

12 Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*, 170-171; and Donald Frasier's descriptions in "Long Marches and Short Rations: The Advance of Sibley's Brigade on Valverde" in *The Collected Papers of the*

First Fort Craig Conference (Washington, D. C.: U .S. Department of the Interior, 2000.

13 As described by Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico* and Beck, *New Mexico*. Also *The Official Reports of the War of Rebellion*, Library of Congress. One of the battle's key players, Union Col. John Slough, was appointed by Lincoln as military governor of Alexandria, Virginia, and Slough later served as one of Lincoln's pall bearers.

14 One Confederate soldier expressed no fond feelings for New Mexico: "I have lost all interest in or care for the country. It has proven itself a land of sorrow, to us, and to many others, for our little band has been much reduced by disease and battle." Pvt. Frank Starr, in a letter of 4 May 1862 to his father, written during the retreat from New Mexico. New Mexico State University Library and Special Collections.

15 Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*, 173; Hampton Sides, *Blood and Thunder: An Epic of the American West*, Doubleday, 2006, 306; John Taylor, *Bloody Valverde: A Civil War Battle on the Rio Grande* (University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 132-45. Historians and the generals themselves give different totals of the number dead, missing, or wounded in the battles in New Mexico.

16 Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*, 308-309; Beck, *New Mexico*, 189. Also Harry Kelsey, "Abraham Lincoln and American Indian Policy," *Lincoln Herald*, 77 (Fall 1975): 139-48; David A. Nichols, "The Other Civil War: Lincoln and the Indians." *Minnesota History*, 44 (Spring 1974): 2-15; and Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 359-68.

17 Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*, and Daren Earl Kellogg, "Lincoln's New Mexico Patronage: Saving the Far Southwest for the Union," *New Mexico Historical Review*, October 2000. 511-22.

18 As described by Beck, *New Mexico*, Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*,. Also The Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, Carleton kept Washington up-to-date on his campaign against Native tribes in regular letters from New Mexico.

19 Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*, 319-320; Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 361.

20 Marc Simmons, *New Mexico: An Interpretive History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 155

21 Kellogg, "Lincoln's New Mexico Patronage," 521; Simmons, 142.

22 Kellogg, "Lincoln's New Mexico Patronage," 511.

23 Ibid., 521.

24 As described at the New Mexico Office of the State Historian web site at http://www.newmexicohistory.org

25 There were ten separate bills introduced in Congress by 1860 calling for the creation of Arizona. Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood*, 88-89.

26 Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood*, 94, and *Harper's History of the Great Rebellion*, which shows a February 1862 map of the Confederate Territory of Arizona.

27 Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood*, 94.