

The Battle of Glorieta Pass March 26-28, 1862

In 1861, Confederate President Jefferson Davis approved Brigadier General Henry Hopkins Sibley's plan to raise a force of Texans to invade New Mexico Territory. His objectives were to capture military supplies from Union forts in New Mexico and to recruit New Mexicans, Utah Mormons, and Colorado miners to the Confederate cause. The mineral wealth of the West would enrich the Confederacy and, if the ports of California could be taken, the South would have blockade-free international trade.

Col. Edward R.S. Canby, Union commander of the Department of New Mexico, soon learned of the invasion plans. With only 2500 Federal troops in New Mexico, Canby appealed to the governors of New Mexico and Colorado to organize companies of volunteers. By early 1862, Canby had 4000 troops at the ready.

Meanwhile, Sibley had begun his move up the Rio Grande with 3000 Fourth, Fifth, and Seventh Texas Mounted Riflemen. The first major battle in the territory took place at Valverde, near Fort Craig, 100 miles south of Albuquerque, on February 21, 1862. Drawing the Union troops out of the fort, the Confederate Texans won the hard-fought battle. Canby and his troops withdrew into the fort. Sibley decided to press on to Albuquerque, reluctant to risk casualties by attacking the fort and without sufficient

artillery for a long siege. Sibley had no fear of pursuit by the cautious Canby; the Confederates considered the Union forces too demoralized and disorganized to continue the fight.

In Colorado, the First Regiment of Colorado Volunteers had formed under the command of Col. John P. Slough and began their march to New Mexico. The 950 miners covered the 400 miles to Fort Union in 13 days, arriving on March 10 to reinforce the fort's 800 troops. Taking command of Fort Union and violating his orders to remain there, Slough and the Colorado volunteers, augmented by regular army troops and New Mexico volunteers, headed toward Santa Fe on the Santa Fe Trail. By March 25, a Union vanguard under the command of Major John M. Chivington set up Camp Lewis at Kozlowski's Stage Stop near the Pecos Pueblo ruins.

After the battle at Valverde, Sibley sent Major Charles Pyron and his Fifth Texas Regiment ahead of the main Confederate force to capture the unprotected capital of Santa Fe. The Confederate flag flew over the Palace of the Governors on March 13. Pyron's Texans then made their way up the Santa Fe Trail toward Fort Union and camped at Johnson's Ranch in Apache Canyon, unaware of the Union camp nine miles east.

MARCH 26 AND 27

On the morning of March 26, Chivington and a group of Colorado Volunteers left Camp Lewis on a reconnaissance mission to find the location and size of the Texas force. They surprised and captured a Confederate scouting party at Glorieta Pass. A short distance away, they ran into the main body of Pyron's Confederates near present-day Valencia. Battle lines were quickly formed and the two pieces of Texas artillery began shelling the Union troops. Union skirmishers were deployed in flanking movements and their fire quickly made the Confederate position impossible. The Union cavalry failed to charge the retreating Confederates as instructed, enabling the Texans to escape and re-establish their defenses. They destroyed a log bridge to impede the Union advance, but the Union cavalry crossed the gap and charged into the Confederate ranks. About 70 Confederates were pushed into a small box canyon

and captured. As night fell, both sides called a truce to care for their casualties. Pyron and his Confederates returned to Johnson's Ranch, set up defenses and waited for reinforcements under Col. William Scurry to arrive from Galisteo, 15 miles away. Union troops withdrew to Camp Lewis, where Slough was waiting with his troops. Both forces readied themselves in anticipation of an attack the next day, but March 27 ended without incident.

That night, Union spies warned Slough of the reinforced Confederate force at Johnson's Ranch. A flanking movement was devised: Chivington and Lt. Col. Manuel Chavez of the New Mexico Volunteers would take 450 men over Glorieta Mesa to harass the Confederate right flank or rear. Meanwhile, Slough and the remaining 900 men would move directly against the Confederates along the Santa Fe Trail.

MARCH 28

As the day began, both sides moved toward each other. To speed his advance, Scurry left the Confederate supply train at Johnson's Ranch. With about 900 men, Scurry moved east on the Santa Fe Trail, hoping to engage the Union troops on level ground near the ruins of Pecos Pueblo.

Slough's Union forces proceeded west along the Trail. They had broken ranks at Pigeon's Ranch to fill their canteens when scouts rushed back to inform them that the Confederates were at hand. Before the Union troops could organize, they were under fire. Battle lines were drawn up west of Pigeon's Ranch

along Windmill Hill and across the valley floor. After an hour of fighting, the Union troops retreated to a better defensive position centered at Pigeon's Ranch.

Union artillery was anchored on the Santa Fe Trail at Pigeon's Ranch and on the left flank up Artillery Hill. After three hours of almost constant fighting, the Texans outflanked the Union right and drove them off Sharpshooter's Ridge. From this vantage point, they fired down on the Union artillery. Slough then ordered a second Union retreat and set up a defensive line one-half mile east of Pigeon's Ranch.

The Texans made one more charge against the Union line. As darkness fell, Slough ordered his troops back to Camp Lewis. Both sides were near exhaustion after six hours of battle. The Texans were left in possession of the field and claimed victory, but the celebration was a short one.

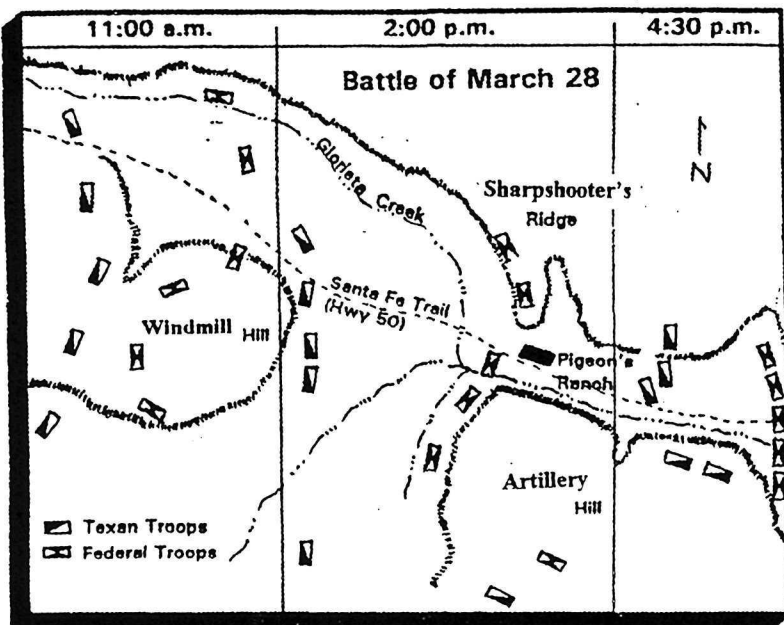
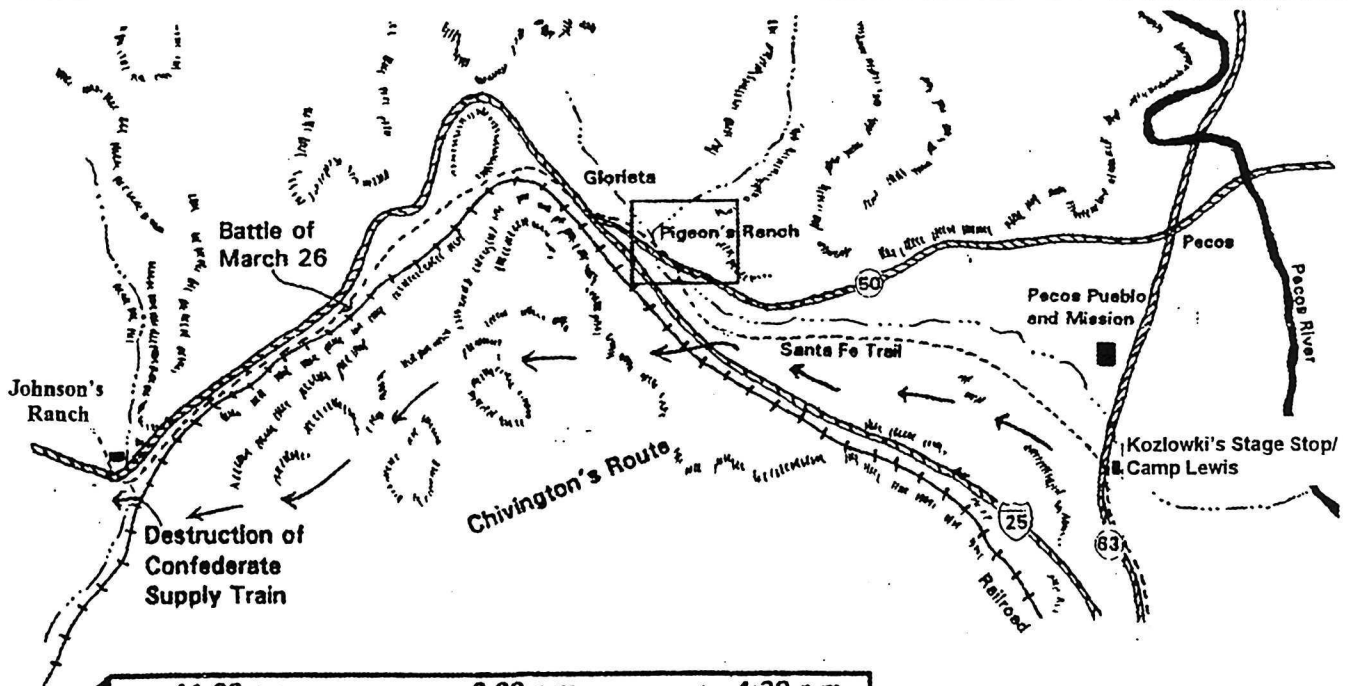
Scurry received word that the Confederate supply wagons had been destroyed at Johnson's Ranch. Chivington's route to the enemy rear had taken him to the west edge of Glorieta Mesa where his forces discovered the wagons below, an easy target since many soldiers had left guard duty to join the fighting at Pigeon's Ranch. The Union troops scrambled down the mesa, drove off the guards, set the horses and mules free, and burned the wagons. Though the guards helped win the battle, Scurry felt that without supplies he could not continue to Fort Union or engage in further combat and withdrew to Santa Fe. Two weeks later, Sibley ordered a retreat to Texas. It was a slow and difficult march. Sickness, the harsh environment, and attacks by Union troops and bands of Apaches dogged every mile. The once strong Texas force reached Fort Bliss in El Paso with only half its original fighting men.

By July 1862, all Confederate troops had left New Mexico Territory. The grand Confederate plan to dominate the West ended at Glorieta. The West remained under Union control.

Many of the great issues of the Civil War had little relevance for residents of the Territory. Far from Washington and Richmond, not yet a state, the arguments over the right to secede may have been of little interest. The zealous pre-war regionalists often viewed the West as a prize rather than a place, concerned that new land acquired in the Mexican War would upset the balance of power between slave and free states. Problems of race and freedom were different in New Mexico: few blacks and large Indian and Hispanic populations meant that the local issues

were the peonage system and the Indian slaves justified as prisoners of war.

Migration and traffic on the Santa Fe Trail were generally unaffected by the Civil War, but the Army's presence was strengthened in response to the Confederate threat and an increase in Indian raids. Some Indian bands in New Mexico Territory saw the white man's war as an opportunity to reclaim lost land; others were desperate since the war had disrupted government treaty payments. Conflicts escalated: most of the Western troops were local volunteers frustrated by being left out of the "real war" who saw rebellious Indians as giving aid and comfort to the enemy. The effects of the Confederate invasion resonated long after the guns fell silent.



TO VISIT THE BATTLEFIELD: The areas around Pigeon's Ranch and Johnson's Ranch are currently closed to public use. Information on guided tours of the battle sites is available from Pecos National Historical Park, PO Box 418, Pecos NM 87552, 505-757-6414 ext 40.