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# SIEGE IN COOKE'S CANYON
## The Freeman Thomas Fight of 1861

by
Berndt Kühn

OF THE NUMEROUS CONFRONTATIONS that occurred between the native Indian population and Anglo-Americans on the southwestern frontier, none is more shrouded in mystery than the legendary ambush of the Freeman Thomas mail party in Cooke's Canyon, New Mexico, in July 1861. The story of the desperate stand of seven white men against a superior force of Apache Indians has been told many times and continues to fascinate historians to this day. Largely due to the fact that no white participant survived to tell his tale, and the failure to establish with certainty the location of the battleground, many aspects of the affair have remained clouded. What is known is that a stage left Mesilla, New Mexico Territory, bound for California. A few days later the wrecked coach, along with the remains of its occupants, was discovered in Cooke's Canyon, a mountain pass on the main road sixty miles west of Mesilla. Although the full story remains obscure, enough material has surfaced to shed new light on the affair.[1]

Conditions in southern New Mexico at the time of the attack must be viewed in light of the outbreak of the Civil War and the rapid movement of Confederate forces into the area during the summer of 1861. Of equal significance was the outbreak of an Anglo-Indian war that spring that impeded travel along the southern road to California.

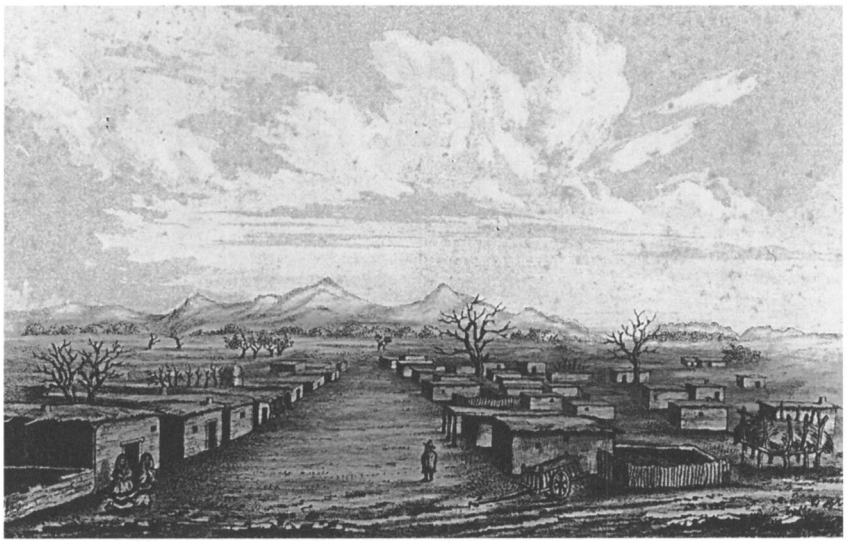
At the dawn of 1861, the white population in the lower Rio Grande Valley was predominantly southern in sentiment. In

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A native of Stockholm, Sweden, Berndt Kühn has been researching Apache and Anglo/Mexican relations for the past fifteen years. Since 1990, he has made annual trips to the Southwest. He would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of Douglas Hamilton and L. Boyd Finch in the preparation of this article.



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*Mesilla, New Mexico, 1854.*

March, a convention at Mesilla, then the principal town in the southern part of the territory, unanimously adopted a resolution to join the rebellion; by summer, southern New Mexico was a boiling pot of secessionist sentiment. Word reached the settlements along the Rio Grande that a Confederate force was advancing over the old stage road from San Antonio, Texas. Federal military installations in western Texas, which had been abandoned during the spring, were now being reoccupied by elements of Texas State Infantry and the Second Regiment of Texas Mounted Rifles, C.S.A., under Lt. Col. John R. Baylor. The vanguard of Baylor's command arrived at Franklin, opposite El Paso del Norte, during the first week of July. Although the Hispanic population entertained mixed feelings about the newcomers, a vast majority of the Anglo-Americans at Franklin and river settlements below welcomed the southern troops. A local spy company had already been organized to spearhead the advance into New Mexico. Confederate agents also enlisted additional recruits in the mining communities of southern New Mexico. Across the Rio Grande a few miles downstream from Mesilla, the recently reinforced Union garrison at Fort Fillmore, the southernmost post in New Mexico, prepared to oppose the impending invasion. Meanwhile, Federal



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forces were withdrawing from the western part of the territory in preparation for the move to the eastern theater of operations.[2]

Since its inauguration in 1858, the Overland Mail Company had maintained regular service between St. Louis and San Francisco. Because an act of Congress in March of 1861 transferred the line to a more northern route across Nevada, mail service between New Mexico, the Pacific Coast, and eastern settlements was interrupted as the company abandoned the southern route during the spring. All of its property west of Sherman, Texas, was moved over the trail toward California. By late May, the Overland Mail Company had abandoned New Mexico. Into its place stepped George H. Giddings's ill-fated San Antonio & San Diego Mail Line, which had been transporting mail and passengers across New Mexico and Arizona since 1857. The company had lost part of its line when the Overland Mail Company commenced operations over the same route in 1858. With a new contract, effective from April 1, 1861, to June 30, 1865, Giddings's coaches would again connect Texas with the Pacific Coast. But, hampered from the start by mounting Indian hostilities, Giddings's operations on the western section of the route were short-lived. There was only sporadic activity along the mail line west of Mesilla in the summer of 1861 and by late August traffic had ceased.[3]

The relatively friendly relations between Anglo-Americans and the Chiricahua Apaches in southwestern New Mexico had begun to deteriorate after the discovery of gold along a tributary of the Gila River in May 1860. Within weeks, several hundred prospectors flocked to the new El Dorado. The mining town of Pinos Altos quickly sprang up in the heartland of the Chihennes, the eastern band of the Chiricahuas. Although newcomers and the Apaches initially averted hostilities, an eventual clash was inevitable. In December 1860, a party of miners attacked an Apache ranchería on the Mimbres River, fifteen miles east of Pinos Altos. Several Indians were killed in the ensuing melee and a number of women and children were taken captive, inciting Mangas Coloradas, powerful chief of the Chihennes, to commence hostilities. Matters worsened two months later when a dispute over a captured boy led to a bloody confrontation between the military and Cochise's Chokonens, the central band of the Chiricahuas, drastically altering relations between the two races.[4]



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The square-off began on January 21, 1861, when a party of Pinal Apaches raided the ranch of John A. Ward, twelve miles south of Fort Buchanan in present-day southern Arizona. The Indians abducted Ward's twelve-year-old stepson and carried off some cattle. Suspicion fell upon Cochise's band encamped in Apache Pass, a narrow defile between the Chiricahua and Dos Cabezas mountains in southeastern Arizona. A week later, a company of the Seventh Infantry, under 2d Lt. George N. Bascom, was dispatched to recover the boy. Following a series of confrontations in the pass, in which both sides took hostages, Cochise killed his captives and fled across the border into Mexico. In reprisal, the soldiers hanged six Apaches. The attack at the Mimbres River and the confrontation at Apache Pass, better known as the Bascom Affair, triggered an all-out war with the Chiricahua Apaches that would intermittently plague the region for eleven years. Its effects were soon felt along the mail route west of Mesilla.[5]

Travel on the southern route had become hazardous by the spring of 1861. In late April, a Chokonen war party under Cochise annihilated several parties of civilians near Stein's Peak, at the eastern entrance to Doubtful Canyon. The victims included the occupants of a westbound mail coach. Soon after, the Chihennes commenced hostilities in the vicinity of Pinos Altos. Other travelers subsequently lost their lives on the road between Tucson and Mesilla. By midsummer confusion reigned as Federal troops prepared to withdraw from the western part of the territory. Left without adequate protection, many settlers fled from the Apache raids. Only large, well-armed groups dared make the trip across the desert, a fact that the Freeman Thomas party certainly was aware of as they began their fateful journey.[6]

Early on the morning of July 20, a stage with seven men on board rolled out from Mesilla, bound for Los Angeles. A local newspaper described the occupants as experienced frontiersmen, some of whom had worked along the mail line and had witnessed first hand the brutality of Apache warfare. Closer scrutiny reveals a mixed group of individuals. Freeman Thomas, the conductor of the party, was a twenty-nine-year-old native of Ohio. Enumerated as a grocer at Franklin, Texas, in the 1860 census, he soon took employment on the stage line. In May 1861, only two months prior to his death, he surveyed the results of an Apache ambush



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Map by Ron Beckwith

in which Cochise had waylaid a westbound stage near Stein's Peak Station.[7]

Emmett Mills, age nineteen, was born in Thorntown, Indiana. He came to New Mexico in 1859 and together with two brothers, Anson and William, started a ranch at Canutillo, thirty miles south of Mesilla. He was later employed by the Butterfield Overland Mail Company. Following the withdrawal of the company from the southern route, Emmett joined Giddings's San Antonio & San Diego Mail Line. By May 1861, he was employed at a station described by his brother William as "dangerous a place" 200 miles west of Mesilla, at either Apache Pass or Dragoon Springs. Heeding the call to oppose Baylor's Confederate invaders, Emmett arrived at Fort Fillmore around mid-July, "eager for the fray." At Fillmore, he learned that William had been arrested as a Union spy at El Paso del Norte. Since anti-Union feelings ran high in the valley, he doubtless welcomed an opportunity to leave the settlements.[8]

Robert S. Avaline, a gambler by some accounts, had signed a petition for military protection during a riot in Mesilla in February 1860. A year later, he signed another appeal to military au-



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thorities for protection against Indians. By May 1861, he was in the employ of Gidding's company. Matthew Champion's home was St. Louis. He had worked for the Santa Rita Silver Mining Company in the mountains south of Tucson in 1859. Together with Freeman Thomas, Avaline and Champion had witnessed the results of the Apache ambush near Stein's Peak.[9]

John Wilson, a twenty-nine-year-old New Yorker, presumably came to the Southwest with the Overland Mail Company in 1858. While stationed at Apache Pass in January 1860, he killed a Mexican boy captive of Cochise in self-defense, which prompted Wilson's transfer out of the area. By September, he was a station keeper at Cow Springs Station. Wilson also had viewed the results of the Stein's Peak attack.[10]

John Portell had wounded secessionist Thomas J. Mastin during a shoot-out in the streets of Mesilla on May 17, 1861. A $200 reward for his capture was promptly posted the following day. The money was still being offered at the time of Portell's final departure from Mesilla. Not much is known of the driver, Joseph Roescher, a twenty-six-year-old native of Holstein, Germany. The 1860 census taker found him at Franklin, Texas.[11]

Although Thomas's men were "general favorites in the Rio Grande Valley," the existing secessionist sentiments and the uncertain loyalties of the officers at nearby Fort Fillmore suggest that some of them had ample reason to leave Mesilla. By doing so, they would also avoid contact with Baylor's advancing Confederates then massing at Fort Bliss, less than fifty miles away.[12]

The stage that swung out from the old Overland Mail corral in Mesilla that July morning was not a "purloined Overland Mail Company coach," as one source reported. One of Giddings's rigs had arrived two days earlier from California and still sported the title of the company on its doors. The likelihood that the eastbound stage continued toward Texas seems remote. At the time, an infantry company was stationed at Santo Tomas, ten miles south of Mesilla, to cut off all communication by ordinary channels. Any southbound stage or traveler would have been intercepted and turned back. Similar precautions were no doubt taken by Baylor's forces to disguise their impending movements into New Mexico. This would rule out the possiblility of a through mail from Texas. A stage, presumably from San Antonio, did in fact ar-



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rive at Franklin on July 20, 1861, but headed back downriver two days later. Claims that the Thomas party "blasted" their way out of Franklin lack supporting evidence.

Most likely, Thomas commandeered the stage from California and outfitted it for a return trip to the coast. Probably a "celerity" wagon, it was lighter and faster than a Concord coach and was often used on rougher sections of the mail route. In addition to food and water, the stage apparently was well-stocked with arms and ammunition. The employees along the mail line were usually armed with breach-loading Sharps rifles. More advanced than other weapons of its time, the rifle had significantly improved security along the trail after its introduction in 1853. Giddings subsequently augmented his arsenal with later models, which accounted for the "improved rifles" supposedly carried by Thomas's men. In addition, every man bore side arms and some may have brought along an extra rifle. A substantial amount of ammunition may have been on board the coach, although claims of "two thousand rounds" seem exaggerated.[13]

After leaving Mesilla, the stage followed the Calle Principal north through fertile bottom lands along the west bank of the Rio Grande toward Picacho. From there, the party turned northwest up the steep, sandy trail to the summit of a mesa and then continued their westward journey across the tableland. Passing by the Rough & Ready and Goodsight stations, the stage emerged from the Goodsight Mountains and made straight for the southern foothills of Cooke's Range and the Cooke's Spring Station. The spring, located half a mile west of the station and some sixty miles west of Mesilla, was the first dependable water source since leaving the Rio Grande.

Although some writers have claimed that the employees at the Cooke's Spring Station were the last people to see the Thomas party alive, it is doubtful that the station was occupied at the time the coach stopped there. Stations all along the line had been abandoned as the Overland Mail train traveled west to California in mid-May. In addition, the company destroyed several station buildings that had not been transferred to the San Antonio & San Diego Mail Line. It is uncertain to what extent Giddings was able to restock the line. His company completed only a few runs west of Mesilla between May and August of 1861. On the day the Free-



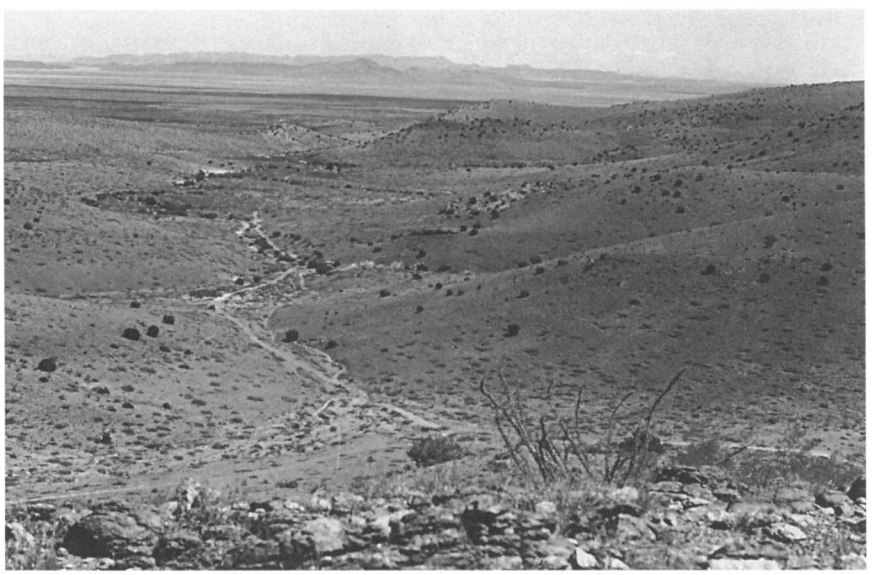
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man Thomas party left Mesilla, a local newspaper announced that the S.A. & S.D. line would commence a weekly service to California "as soon as the stock can be placed on the road."[14]

According to local legend, difficult to verify, the Freeman Thomas party delayed at the station so long in the early morning of July 21 that they had to negotiate the canyon in broad daylight. Given the area's sinister reputation, the men were probably well aware of the potential risk of an Apache ambush. Why, then, did they fail to use the cover of darkness to slip through the canyon? Most likely, no replacement animals were available after their departure from Mesilla. This, combined with lack of water along the route, may have forced them to recuperate at the spring.[15]

Cooke's Canyon is not, as one would assume, a narrow defile lined with ambush opportunities. Rather, it offers a few selected sites where a sizable body of men could lay concealed. From the spring, the road extends west over a level plain for almost a mile before making a sharp turn north into the narrow eastern mouth of the canyon. From there, it runs along the base of a steep rocky ridge on the east and north sides.The rugged heights overlooking

*Cooke's Canyon looking east. The possible battle site is on right, just above center.*



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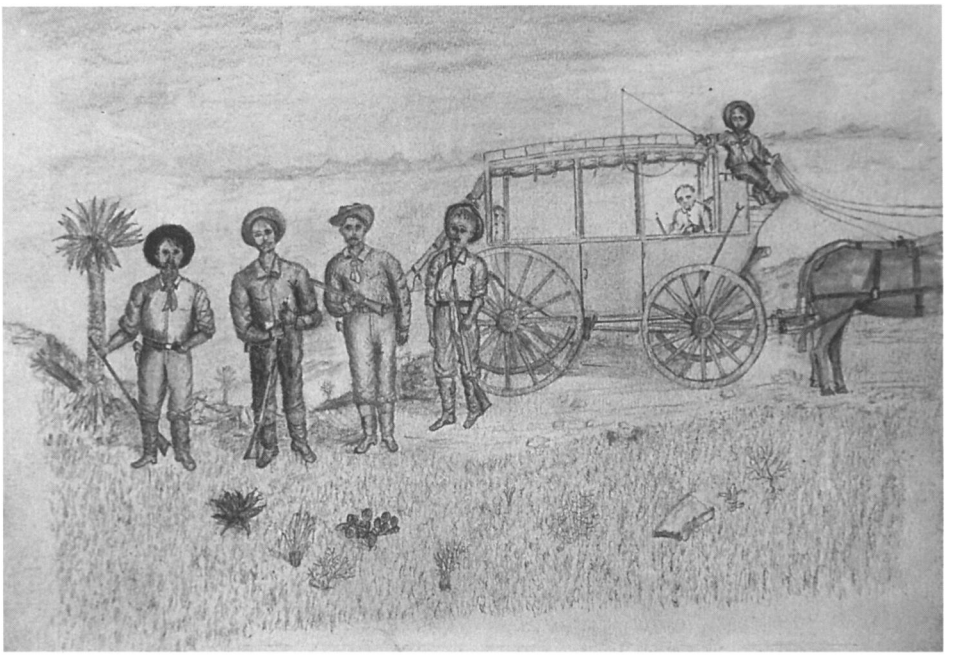
the road are covered with natural rock fortifications, which afford excellent concealment for an enemy waiting in ambush. Leaving the narrow gap, the road again turns west across a small valley, then narrows somewhat in the west canyon and gradually ascends for half a mile to the summit of the pass. Beyond the summit, the road drops abruptly to the valley floor and gradually turns northwest toward the Mimbres Valley. Judging from the numerous accounts of Indian attacks and the graves that line the roadside, the Chiricahua Apaches obviously frequented the eastern and western ends of the canyon.[16]

As the doomed party began its approach toward the entrance of the canyon on the morning of July 21, watchful eyes keenly observed every move on board the coach. Although Thomas and his men must have anticipated a brush with the Indians, they were completely unaware of the presence of the combined forces of Cochise and Mangas Coloradas, hidden in ambush only a few hundred yards away. The stage was set for one of the most desperate fights ever recorded in the annals of frontier warfare.

Apparently, the Apaches sprang their trap about a mile beyond the spring, in the narrow entrance of the canyon. Most likely, when the stage entered the gap, the Indians opened fire from their concealed positions among the rocks on the east and north side of the road, wounding the stage driver, presumably Joseph Roescher. Amid a storm of bullets and arrows launched from the rocky slopes paralleling the road, the coach finally emerged intact from the defile, entered the small valley, and raced across the flats toward the summit of the pass. According to traditional accounts, Thomas then ordered the coach off the road and headed toward the south side of the canyon. The reason for the maneuver is difficult to explain. Perhaps Thomas spotted additional Apaches in the west canyon and, recognizing the danger of being trapped in another ambush, decided to make for a defensive position. Close pursuit by mounted Indians during the flight across the valley may also have forced the maneuver. Whoever held the reins at the time, managed to drive the coach some distance up the side of a ridge in the west canyon. After removing their arms, ammunition, and other essentials, the men abandoned the rig and sent the driverless team back down toward the road, possibly hoping that the Indians would shift their attention



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*"Overland Mail Party Sighting Indians in Distance," by Morgan Wolfe Merrick.*

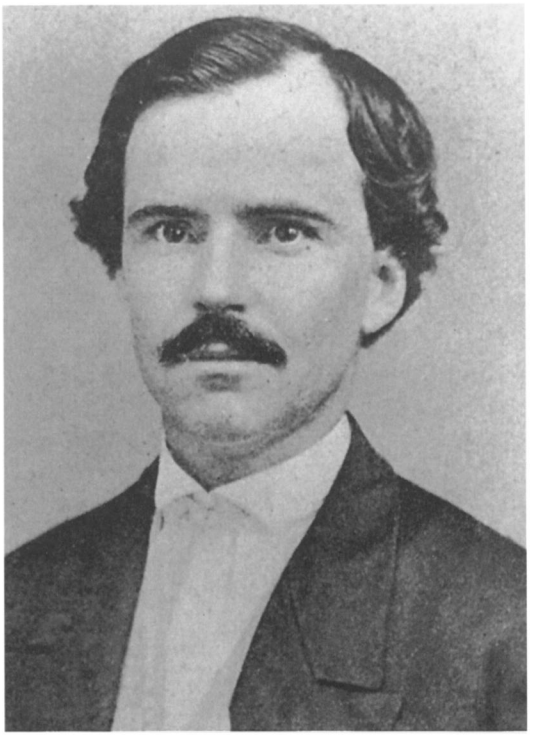
long enough for the passengers to reach the top of the ridge on foot. In this they were badly mistaken. Against heavy opposition every inch of the way, the men finally gained the crest of a hill, leaving a small trail of "blood, tracks, and cartridge hulls" in their wake. The position, about half a mile south of the road, commanded much of the surrounding ground.[17]

Exercising "excellent tact and judgment," they quickly organized an effective defense. According to a witness who later surveyed the battleground, Thomas's men split up and erected small rock enclosures for protection at "advantageous points" along the ridge. The largest of these structures, variously described as a rock wall or parapet, measured ten to twelve square feet and two to three feet high. The defenders eventually congregated at this point, where they erected a sort of arbor across one end of the enclosure to protect the wounded driver from the direct rays of the burning sun. The Apaches, meanwhile occupied the surrounding terrain, including the ridge south of and above the ground held by Thomas's men.[18]

The Apaches must have suffered heavy casualties during the first phase of the battle, before they realized the excellent marks-



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*William W. Mills.*

manship of Thomas's beleaguered men and the rapid firepower of the Sharps rifles. The initial assault soon turned into a prolonged siege and, judging from evidence found later, the use of available cover to get within firing distance proved difficult for the Chiricahuas. Thomas's men targeted every rock or tree that could shelter an Indian within rifle range; one small tree some 150 yards from the main rock enclosure showed eleven bullet marks. The ferocity of the Apaches' onslaught was obvious to the men who later viewed the scene. The ground around the parapet was strewn with battered bullets, mute testimony to the devastating fire the defenders had endured behind their hastily erected shelters. All accounts agree that it was a most desperate struggle.[19]

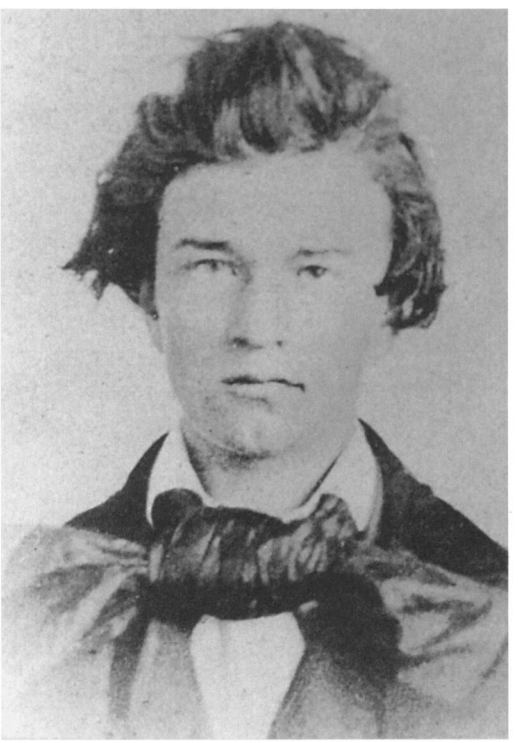
Exactly how long the siege lasted can never be known with certainty. According to the first men who arrived on the battleground, the fight appeared to have lasted two days. Another witness stated that it had been "a prolonged battle . . . having lasted many hours." A story that Mexicans apparently picked up from the Apaches around Janos told how the siege had extended over three days, with Mangas Coloradas withdrawing from the scene after the second day, discouraged by mounting casualties. Much



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has been written about a note that the burial party supposedly found in the parapet. William W. Mills, who in October informed his father of the circumstances surrounding the death of his brother Emmett, was then under the impression that the men had resisted for two days. He failed, however, to mention a written message. In his reminiscences, Mills claimed that a pencilled note, dated July 23, 1861, and concealed under a stone in the parapet, stated that the Thomas party had killed many Indians, that all but two of the defenders were either killed or wounded, that the survivors were out of water, and that they would attempt to escape during the night. Although no evidence has surfaced to verify the existence of the note, there is reason to believe that the men were able to maintain themselves on the hill for two to three days, until a shortage of water or ammunition forced them to attempt an escape.[20]

None of Thomas's men survived the siege in Cooke's Canyon. The remains of Emmett Mills, Joseph Roescher, Robert S. Avaline, and John Portell, were found inside the main parapet. Freeman Thomas and Matthew Champion lay about sixty yards



*Emmett Mills.*

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away, suggesting that they were slain while attempting to escape. John Wilson's body—"shot in a dozen places"—was discovered in a small rock enclosure 150 yards distant. All of the men had been stripped of their clothing, wounded in the arms, and shot through the head. Two or three had been scalped. Although no dead Apaches were found on the battlefield, Indian and white accounts all agree that Thomas's men inflicted heavy losses. The rock-covered remains of several Apaches were found afterwards in a crevice, high up on the slope of Frying Pan Canyon, a short distance west of the summit. Most estimates of Indian casualties are grossly exaggerated, however, some ranging as high as 175 killed. Mangas Coloradas supposedly admitted to losing twenty-five men. Given the nature of Apache warfare, it is difficult to explain why the Indians would have exposed themselves to such severe casualties. Perhaps Cochise recognized John Wilson from their earlier encounter in Apache Pass and closed in to settle the old score. Regardless, it is certain that the Thomas party's desperate resistance made a lasting impression upon their adversaries. Both Mangas Coloradas and Cochise paid tribute to their fallen enemies. Cochise purportedly claimed that with twenty-five such men he would "undertake to whip the whole United States."[21]

Estimates of the number of Indians present at the fight also vary considerably. Based on the trail left by the Apaches, the men who first examined the battlefield believed that the attackers numbered at least 100. Later estimates range from sixty up to 500. The latter figure is obviously too high; the combined forces of Cochise and Mangas Coloradas at this time probably did not exceed 200. Following the battle, the Indians headed south across the border into Chihuahua, where they disposed of their plunder in Janos and Corralitos.[22]

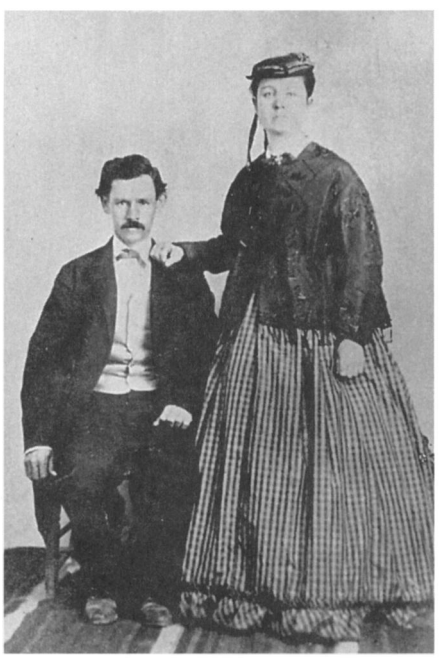
The bodies of Freeman Thomas and his men lay exposed on the ridge where they had fallen. A well-armed party of travelers who passed through the canyon a few days after the fight observed "some buzzards wheeling about a neighboring cliff," but did not stop to investigate. An express from Pinos Altos discovered the grizzly remains around July 26 and brought the news to Mesilla. "A general gloom" immediately spread over the community.[23]

According to contemporary newspaper accounts, employees of Alexandre Daguerre's freight train, en route with a load of ore



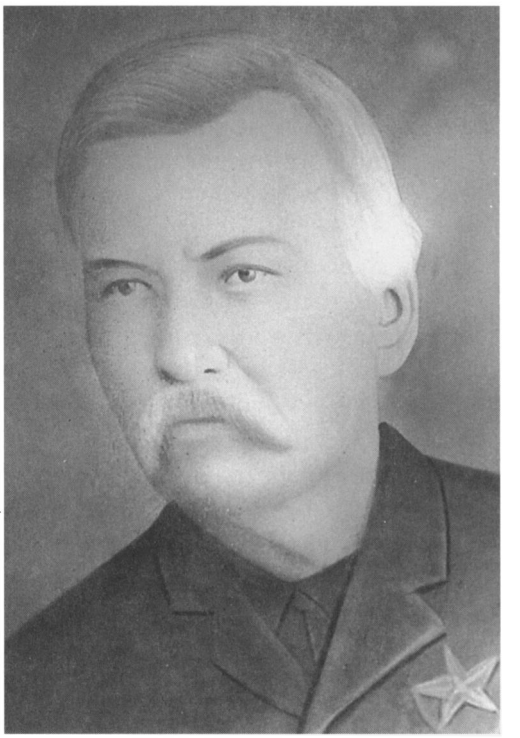
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from the Hanover copper mines to San Antonio, Texas, buried the remains of the mail party. Given the dangerous locality and the character of the ground, however, it is likely that they stopped only long enough to cover up some of the bodies with rocks taken from the parapet. A small detachment of Arizona Rangers under Capt. George M. Frazier arrived on the scene during the first week of August. Formed during the spring, the volunteer unit had recently been enrolled into Confederate service at Fort Fillmore. Frazier's first assignment was to take a detachment of fifteen men to Cooke's Canyon, purportedly to inspect the battleground, but more likely to scout the area for Union troops. Bugler Eugene Van Patten recalled burying the men while the company was on picket duty at Cooke's Spring. Frazier later described how his party discovered the bullet- and arrow-riddled coach as they "chanced to be passing along the stage road." The Arizona Rangers easily followed the trail that Thomas's party had left as they fought their way up to the top of the ridge. The features of some of the victims were still readily recognizable two weeks after the fight. The men were buried on the ridge "just as



*Alexandre Daguerre and his wife, Refugio Samaniego.*

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*Capt. George M. Frazier.*

they were laying." Captain Frazier, who knew several of the victims personally, recalled the event as "one of the most melancholy tasks" he had ever performed. Sgt. Daniel Robinson, who marched with Union troops through the canyon a few days later during their retreat to the Rio Grande, noticed "the remains of the last overland coach." His observation is the last dependable description of the physical evidence of the Freeman Thomas affair.[24]

Considered "a most remarkable fight" at the time, the stand of the Freeman Thomas party eventually became a frontier legend. As with Gen. George Armstrong Custer's last stand at the Little Bighorn in 1876, there were no white survivors to contradict the efforts of imaginative writers to embellish the story. The birth of the legend can be traced to William S. Oury's 1879 account in the *Arizona Daily Star*. Oury had worked as an agent for the Overland Mail Company in 1861 and may have known some of the Thomas party. Although Oury's version has some value, his description of the siege is suspiciously detailed, identifying all the Anglo participants, as well as recounting their actions and conversations during the fight. Oury, who had left Arizona with the balance of the Overland Mail Company in June of 1861 and was too



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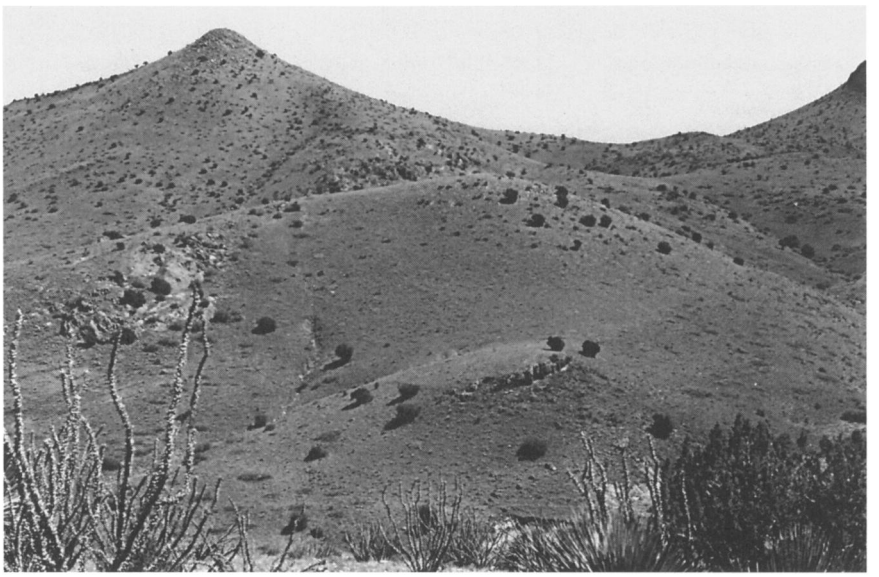
far removed from the scene to have received firsthand accounts at the time of the fight, claimed that his information came directly from Cochise at Corralitos, where the Chiricahuas went after the fight. He does not reveal, however, how he obtained Cochise's account or how he could identify the actions of every white participant. Although it is possible that Oury afterwards obtained information from the men in the burial party, his imagination no doubt added greatly to the story. In 1915, historian Thomas Farish furnished another garbled account of the Freeman Thomas affair in his *History of Arizona.* Farish confused the location of the fight, as well as the number of participants involved, and erroneously dubbed the group "the Free Thompson party." Both Oury and Farish grossly exaggerated Indian casualties, and until recently other writers have uncritically adopted Oury's and Farish's versions of the siege to produce equally colorful accounts. Nonetheless, the available documentation attests to the stubborn resistance put up by Thomas's men and the no less remarkable persistence of the Apache attackers. The battle rightfully ranks alongside other famous Indian-white engagements in the West.[25]

Although the Freeman Thomas fight was well known along the border, its location was soon lost to memory. Unfortunately, contemporary accounts do not provide specific descriptions of the battleground. The various accounts of the men who buried the party—recorded years later—point to a ridge or hill about a half mile south of the road. A rock enclosure at the summit of the pass attracted the attention of local stage drivers and travelers in the 1870s and 1880s. At least one writer identified it as the site of the Freeman Thomas encounter, but the area's level ground makes this location doubtful. In 1920, on behalf of Anson Mills, H. P. Corbin of the International Boundary Commission hired two old-timers, who claimed some knowledge of the area, to locate the battleground and the grave of Emmett Mills. The party explored Cooke's Canyon for two days, but failed to turn up any conclusive evidence. Later that year, Anson Mills dedicated a monument on the grounds of El Paso's public library in memory of Emmett and his six companions.[26]

Later studies seem to favor the west canyon as the most likely location of the last stand. A recent examination of the high ground



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*Cooke's Canyon. The hill in center of photograph may be the battle site.*

south of the road has uncovered the foundation of a small rock enclosure that may be related to the fight. No graves or other relics, however, have been found to corroborate the site. The remains of the Freeman Thomas party still rest in unmarked graves.[27]

Walking through the canyon today, one finds that the land has not changed much in the 130 years since the Freeman Thomas fight. Only a cattle fence or occasional jeep tracks mark the passing of time. Fortunately, the remote setting has prevented much of the plunder by relic hunters that has befallen other sites in the region. The lonely graves still visible in the area provide a lasting reminder of the hardships and dangers that faced the early traveler. Perhaps some day the discovery of the remains of the seven men who fought so gallantly under the hot July sun will give us further details of their passing.



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NOTES

1. The abundant literature includes Keith Humphries, "Seven Brave Men," *Old West*, vol. 14 (Winter 1977), pp. 26–27; Douglas D. Martin, "Battle at Cooke's Canyon," *True West*, vol. 10 (September–October 1962), pp. 16–17; James H. Tevis, *Arizona in the '50's* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), pp. 229–30; W. W. Mills, *Forty Years at El Paso, 1858–1898* (El Paso: Carl Hertzog, 1962), pp. 53–54, 195–96; Donald H. Couchman, *Cooke's Peak—Pasaron Por Aqui: A Focus on United States History in Southwestern New Mexico* (Las Cruces: Bureau of Land Management, 1990), pp. 132–33; Edwin R. Sweeney, *Cochise, Chiricahua Apache Chief* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 181–83, 433. For fictional accounts, see Will Henry, *The Seven Men at Mimbres Springs* (New York: Random House, 1958), and Brian Garfield, *Seven Brave Men* (New York: Magnum Books, Inc., 1962). Cooke's Canyon, a rough three-mile passage through the southern foothills of Cooke's Range, was considered the most dangerous point on the southern route to California on account of Indian attacks. On October 2, 1863, Fort Cummings was established nearby to protect travelers in the area. Robert W. Frazer, *Forts of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), p. 98.

2. Settled in 1850, Mesilla became an important agricultural and commercial center in southern New Mexico. When the Overland Mail Company began its operations in 1858, the town was a stop on the route to California. In 1860, it boasted a population of 2,240. T. M. Pearce, *New Mexico Place Names* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1965), p. 100; John P. Wilson, "A *Mesilla Times* returns to New Mexico," *El Palacio*, vol. 78 (1972), p. 3. For the secession convention and Confederate troop movements, see *Mesilla Times*, March 16, 1861; L. Boyd Finch, *Confederate Pathway to the Pacific: Major Sherod Hunter and Arizona Territory, C.S.A.* (Tucson: Arizona Historical Society, 1996), pp. 56–57; Martin H. Hall, *The Confederate Army of New Mexico* (Austin: Presidial Press, 1978), pp. 304, 327, 346, 377; Michael Steck to James L. Collins, July 15, 1861, Letters Received (LR), New Mexico Superintendency (NMS), 1849–1880, Record Group (RG) 75, National Archives (NA); Martin H. Hall, "Native Mexican Relations in Confederate Arizona," *Journal of Arizona History* [*JAH*], vol. 8 (Autumn 1967), p. 171; Wayne R. Austerman, "Old Nighthawk and the Pass of the North," *Password*, vol. 27 (Fall 1982), pp. 116–18. On July 7, 1861, the Fort Fillmore garrison was reinforced by three infantry companies from recently abandoned Fort McLane. Isaac Lynde to Acting Assistant Adjutant General (AAAG), July 8, 1861, LR, Department of New Mexico (DNM), RG 393, NA.

3. Originally named after its president, John Butterfield, the company began operating between St. Louis and San Francisco in September 1858. Initially 141 stations were built along the 2,800-mile route, using 250 coaches to maintain a semi-weekly service. The contract for carrying mail across Texas was annulled on March 2, 1861. Roscoe P. and Margaret B. Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail, 1857–1869*, 3 vols. (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1947), vol. 1, pp. 123, 125; Wayne R. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules: The San Antonio-El Paso Mail, 1851–1881* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), pp. 131, 161. On May 18, 1861, General Superintendent Owen C. Tuller led a train with the balance of company property, composed of 100 men, 200 animals, twenty-one coaches and other vehicles through Mesilla en route to California. *Mesilla Times*, May 18, 1861; *Los Angeles Star*, June 29, 1861. Founded by James E. Birch, the San Antonio & San Diego Mail Line (SA & SD Mail Line) commenced a semi-monthly service in July 1857. Also known as the "Jackass Mail" for its use of pack mules on the route west of Fort Yuma, it was taken over by George H.Giddings in March 1858. Giddings lost the route between El Paso and Fort Yuma in October 1858. The new contract linked San Antonio with Los Angeles. The last westbound coach departed Mesilla on August 12, 1861, together with an escort of Confederate soldiers. The final mail from California probably arrived on August 16 or 19. The service between Mesilla and San Antonio continued until August 1862, when the last Confederate units withdrew from western Texas. *Mesilla Times*, August 17, 24, 1861; Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, pp. 90, 120–21, 133, 143, 161, 169, 187–88. George H. Giddings was born in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, in 1823. A former Texas Ranger and a veteran of the Mexican War, he became involved in the San Antonio-El Paso mail in the early



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1850s and eventually operated the SA & SD line. Burdened from the start by Indian raids, his enterprise was a financial failure. He died in Mexico City on December 12, 1902. Dan L. Thrapp, *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography*, 3 vols. (Spokane, Wash.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1990), vol. 2, pp. 554–55.; *San Antonio Daily Express*, May 4, 1902.

4. On May 3, 1860, Jacob Snively, Henry Burch, and James W. Hicks discovered gold on Bear Creek, about ten miles north of present-day Silver City. Originally named Burchville, the community was soon renamed Pino Alto and later Pinos Altos. *Mesilla Times*, October 25, 1860; Thrapp, *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography*, vol. 1, pp. 114–15, vol. 3, p. 1339; Thrapp, *Victorio and the Mimbres Apaches* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), p. 67. For contemporary accounts of the sentiments prevailing at the time of the attack, see Undersigned Citizens to Steck, September 2, 1860, and Pinckney R. Tully to Collins, January 3, 1861, LR, NMS. James H. Tevis led twenty-six civilians during the attack on December 4, 1860. The Indian prisoners were turned over to a detachment of soldiers from Fort McLane and released in February 1861. Matthew R. Stevenson to Lynde, December 15, 1860, and Lynde to AAAG, December 18, 1860, February 17, 1861, LR, DNM; *San Francisco Herald*, December 27, 1860, quoting the *Mesilla Times*, December 13, 1860; *Mesilla Times*, May 11, 18, 1861; Tevis, *Arizona in the '50's*, pp. 206–216. Mangas Coloradas was born about 1795 in southwestern New Mexico. A Bedonkohe by birth, he exercised great influence over the Chihennes, as well as other Apache groups. He joined Cochise in the war against Anglo-Americans in 1861. A party of California troops and civilians captured Mangas in January 1863 and carried him to old Fort McLane. While in the custody of the guard, he was murdered on the night of January 18. Thrapp, *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography*, vol. 2, pp. 935–36; Edwin R. Sweeney, letter to author, October 26, 1996; Lee Myers, "The Enigma of Mangas Coloradas' Death," *New Mexico Historical Review*, vol. 41 (October 1966), pp. 287–304.

5. Among the Indians hanged was Coyuntura, a brother of Cochise. See Charles K. Mills, "The Bascom Affair," *Cochise Quarterly*, vol. 22 (Summer 1993), pp. 3–24; Sweeney, *Cochise*, pp. 144–65, for a detailed account of the affair. Cochise was born about 1805, possibly in the Chiricahua Mountains of southeastern Arizona. He rose to leadership of his local group of Chokonens in the late 1850s and eventually headed the entire band. Following the Bascom Affair in February 1861, he began an unrelenting war against Anglo-Americans. In 1872, a fragile peace was established on his terms. He died of natural causes on June 4, 1874. Thrapp, *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography*, vol. 1, pp. 290–91.

6. The common belief that Cochise began hostilities immediately following the Bascom Affair is incorrect. He did not appear in force north of the border until late April 1861 (see note 7). The confusion probably stems from Ralph A. Ogle, *Federal Control of the Western Apaches, 1858–1886* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940), p. 45, in which the author claims 150 whites were killed within sixty days after the confrontation at Apache Pass. In stark contrast, *Mesilla Times* of May 11, 1861, described the two succeeding months as "comparatively quiet." See also, ibid., June 8, 1861. By mid-August, only Tucson, Pinos Altos, and the Mowry Mine remained of the settlements between the Rio Grande and the Colorado River in the southern part of the territory. Constance W. Altshuler, "Arizona in 1861: A Contemporary Account," *JAH*, vol. 25 (Spring 1984), pp. 21–76.

7. *Mesilla Times*, July 27, 1861; Thrapp, *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography*, vol. 3, pp. 1417–18; Jerry D. Thompson, ed., *From Desert to Bayou: The Civil War Journal and Sketches of Morgan Wolfe Merrick* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1991), p. 38. On April 28, 1861, a stage with five civilians on board was ambushed by Chiricahua Apaches under Cochise near the abandoned mail station at Stein's Peak. The victims were John James Giddings, Samuel Neely, Edward Briggs, Anthony Elder, and W. McNess. *Mesilla Times*, May 11, 18, 1861; Cornelia M. Noble diary, transcript in Eugene C. Barker Texas History Collections, University of Texas, Austin; George W. Baylor, "Tragedies on the Old Overland Stage Route," *Frontier Times*, vol. 26 (March 1949), p. 125.

8. Thrapp, *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography*, vol. 2, p. 990. William W. Mills was arrested in the plaza of El Paso del Norte about July 16, 1861. He was taken across the river to Fort Bliss, where he was confined for a month. Eugene O. Porter, ed., "Letters Home: W. W.



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Mills Writes to his Family," *Password*, vol. 17 (Spring 1972), pp. 8–10, 17–18; Mills, *Forty Years*, pp. 51–53, 185.

9. George M. Frazer to George W. Howland, February 22, 1860, James A. Lucas to Thomas T. Fauntleroy, February 18, 1861, LR, DNM; Keith Humphries, *Apache Land from Those Who Lived It* (El Paso: Printing Corner, 1981), p. 140; Baylor, "Overland Stage Route," p. 125; Matthew Champion, in Hayden Biographical Files, Arizona Historical Society, Tucson.

10. Tevis thought Wilson was a Missourian. Tevis, *Arizona in the '50's*, p. 170; U.S. Census, Doña Ana County, New Mexico Territory, 1860; Richard S. Ewell to John D. Wilkins, February 1, 1860, LR, DNM; Baylor, "Overland Stage Route," p. 125.

11. *Mesilla Times*, May 18, July 20, 27, 1861. William S. Oury claimed John Portell held the reins. *Arizona Daily Star*, July 31, 1879. Some of the stage drivers and conductors were enumerated several times, usually at different locations along the line. Other sources give Roescher's name as Roacher and Roeschler. Also enumerated in the census is a twenty-one-year-old conductor named Joseph Rusher, born in Saxony, which may be the same individual. U.S. Census, El Paso County, Texas, 1860; Mills, *Forty Years*, p. 53; *El Paso Times*, January 20, 1887.

12. Baylor's command of 300 Texans entered the territory on July 23, 1861, and occupied Mesilla two days later. Following a brief skirmish with troops from nearby Fort Fillmore, the Union commander, Maj. Isaac Lynde, abandoned the post on the morning of July 27, 1861. *Mesilla Times*, July 27, 1861; William A. Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico, 1846–1868* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), pp. 147–51, 197.

13. *Mesilla Times*, July 20, 1861; Mills, *Forty Years*, p. 195. Martin H. Hall, ed., "The Taylor Letters: Confederate Correspondence from Fort Bliss, 1861," *Military History of Texas and the Southwest*, vol. 15 (1979), p. 45; Humphries, *Apache Land*, p. 139; Conkling, *Butterfield Overland Mail*, vol. 1, p. 133. In December 1852, Giddings's predecessor, Henry Skillman, had ordered a set of Sharps carbines for his men. The Sharps became the standard armament along the mail route. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, pp. 70, 131–32, 179–80; Thomas Farish, *History of Arizona*, 8 vols. (San Francisco: Filmer Brothers Electrotype Co., 1915–18), vol. 2, p. 59.

14. Humphries, *Seven Brave Men*, p. 27. The notion that several stations between Mesilla and Tucson were destroyed by Chiricahua Apaches in May 1861 is false. George H. Giddings's memoirs, published in the *San Antonio Daily Express* in 1902, probably caused the confusion. Contemporary accounts show that the Overland Mail Company burned the stations not sold to Giddings's company. *Mesilla Times*, June 8, July 20, 1861; *San Antonio Daily Express*, May 4, 1902; Austerman, *Sharps Rifles*, pp. 143, 161, 169–170; *Los Angeles Star*, July 27, 1861, quoting the *Mesilla Times*, June 23, 1861.

15. Humphries, *Seven Brave Men*, p. 27.

16. Estimates of the number of people killed due to Indian attacks are grossly exaggerated. A traveler who visited the area in 1867 was told 400 people had lost their lives in the canyon. One tenth of that number would probably be a more accurate assessment. Many graves within the canyon probably date back to 1861, when Apaches ambushed several parties of travelers. William A. Bell, *New Tracks in North America* (New York: Scribner, Welford & Co., 1870), p. 260.

17. Mills, *Forty Years*, p. 195; *El Paso Times*, January 20, 1887; *Arizona Daily Star*, July 31, 1879. The coach was later found overturned near the road with the pole broken. *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, September 7, 1861, quoting the *Mesilla Times*, August 3, 1861. The mention of "cartridge hulls" probably refers to remnants of paper or linen cartridges used at the time. Metal cartridges did not come into use until the late 1860s. *Dallas Morning News*, June 24, 1906; James E. Serven, ed., *The Collection of Guns* (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Stackpole Company, 1964), p. 179; *El Paso Times*, January 20, 1887; *Arizona Daily Star*, July 31, 1879.

18. *Dallas Morning News*, June 24, 1906; *Arizona Daily Star*, July 31, 1879; *El Paso Times*, January 20, 1887; *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, September 7, 1861, quoting the *Mesilla Times*, August 3, 1861.



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19. *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, September 7, 1861, quoting the *Mesilla Times*, August 3, 1861.

20. Ibid.; *Dallas Morning News*, June 24, 1906; *Arizona Daily Star*, July 31, 1879; *El Paso Times*, January 20, 1887; Porter, ed., "Letters Home," p. 9. Mills, *Forty Years*, pp. 53, 195, claimed the note was found by Alexandre Daguerre's party.

21. All accounts agree that four victims were found within the parapet, but vary somewhat regarding their identities. W. S. Oury claimed Robert S. Avaline, John Wilson, and Freeman Thomas tried to escape. *Arizona Daily Star*, July 31, 1879. See also, *El Paso Times*, January 20, 1887; *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, September 7, 1861, quoting the *Mesilla Times*, August 3, 1861; *Mesilla Times*, July 27, 1861; Tevis, *Arizona in the '50's*, p. 229; Humphries, *Apache Land*, pp. 140, 142–43; Sweeney, *Cochise*, pp. 180, 182; Charles K. Mills, "The Fight in Cooke's Canyon," unpublished manuscript in author's possession.

22. *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, September 7, 1861, quoting the *Mesilla Times*, August 3, 1861; Farish, *History of Arizona*, vol. 2, p. 59; Sweeney, *Cochise*, pp. 181, 182, 433.

23. The party, consisting of thirty-three men under Alonso Ridley, was en route from California east to join the Confederacy. They probably passed through the canyon on July 26, 1861. Among them were several resigned army officers, including Gen. Albert S. Johnston. William Preston Johnston, *The Life of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, Embracing his Service in the Armies of the United States, the Republic of Texas, and the Confederate States* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1879), p. 285; *Dallas Herald*, August 28, 1861, quoting the *Mesilla Times*, August 3, 1861. According to the *Mesilla Times* of July 27, 1861, the bodies were discovered that same day. Considering the distance of sixty miles, it is questionable that the express could have made the trip and gotten the news into the paper in one day. Therefore, July 26 seems a more reasonable date for the discovery.

24. James H. Tevis also claimed he had buried Thomas's men while en route from Pinos Altos to Mesilla. He probably traveled with Daguerre's outfit. Tevis, *Arizona in the '50's*, pp. 229–30; *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, September 7, 1861, quoting the *Mesilla Times*, August 3, 1861. The Arizona Rangers were mustered into Confederate service on August 1, 1861. The final interment of the bodies was performed between the date of enrollment and August 5 (6?), when Union troops from the west passed through the canyon. Hall, *Confederate Army*, pp. 354–56; *El Paso Times*, January 20, 1887. Frazier was probably on the lookout for Capt. Isaiah N. Moore's Union troops, then approaching from the west. Moore's command, the garrisons of recently abandoned forts Buchanan and Breckenridge, was bound for Fort Fillmore. He was unaware at the time of Lynde's surrender at San Augustine Springs on July 27. Martin H. Hall, "Captain George M. Frazer's Arizona Rangers, C.S.A.," *Password*, vol. 19 (Summer 1974), pp. 71–77. United States Court of Claims, Indian Depredations, No. 3112, *T. J. Cassner, Administrator v. The United States, et al.* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), p. 27; *Dallas Morning News*, June 24, 1906. In the fall of 1861, William W. Mills met an imprisoned Confederate officer at Fort Craig, who told him about his involvement in the burial. This was probably 2d Lt. William Simmons, who was captured near Fort Craig on November 5, 1861. Simmons belonged to Frazier's company of Arizona Rangers. Porter, ed., "Letters Home," pp. 18-19. Daniel Robinson, "A Narrative of Events Pertaining to C, F, and H Companies of the Seventh Infantry While Serving in New Mexico and Arizona from October 1860, to April 1862," undated manuscript, Daniel Robinson Collection, Fort Laramie National Historic Site, Wyoming.

25. Robert J. Neill to Anson Mills, April 12, 1920, Anson Mills biographical file, Special Collections, University of Texas at El Paso. Oury arrived at Los Angeles on June 27, 1861, together with the vanguard of the Overland Mail train. *Los Angeles Star*, June 29, 1861; Farish, *History of Arizona*, vol. 2, pp. 59–60.

26. Humphries, *Seven Brave Men*, p. 27; Hubert H. Bancroft, *Scraps*, vol. 1, p. 131, Special Collections, Arizona State University Library, Tempe; H. P. Corbin to Anson Mills, April 15, 1920, Anson Mills biographical file. The monument still stands on the city library lawn. Unfortunately, the text contains several errors. *El Paso Herald Post*, January 10, 1974; Couchman, *Cooke's Peak*, p. 159.



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27. Couchman, *Cooke's Peak*, pp. 103, 133.

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