

THE ROAD TO GLORIETA



**GOVERNOR
WILLIAM GILPIN**



"He was equally happy sleeping off a drunken fandango on the dirt floor of a peon's shack, or talking to his little ponies on lonesome mountain trails." - Thomas Karnes

With his departure for Washington, in the winter of 1861, Colorado Governor William Gilpin's direct involvement with military affairs of New Mexico came to an end. He never personally sent any troops to the territory's defense. Nevertheless, with the exception of General Canby, Governor Gilpin was the individual most directly responsible for thwarting Sibley's invasion. If he hadn't ignored Washington's directives and raised his regiments, during the late summer and fall of 1861, there would have been no Colorado Volunteers to rush to Fort Union's defense. Colonel Paul and his disheartened garrison may well have fallen to the Texan advance, leaving Colonel Canby to be starved out or defeated in detail.

For his brashness, Gilpin was removed from office. Throughout the winter, criticism of his unorthodox financing methods intensified both in Denver and in Washington. His brief visit to the capital resulted in the payment of only a few vouchers, and his creditors grew angrier by the day. Other charges began to fly, alleging, that the Governor made extravagant profits on the military equipment that he procured. Harvey Vaile, the Indian agent in western Colorado, accused him of buying useless Indian ponies, at \$40 to \$100 a head, and selling them to the troops for \$175. It was also asserted, that Gilpin made similar profits on clothing and foodstuffs. On February 18, 1862, after his unsuccessful struggle to obtain payment for his vouchers, Gilpin was preparing to return to Denver. Instead, he found himself called before a special committee of the U.S. House of Representatives probing the purchase of army supplies. The committee was conducting a wide ranging investigation into procurement fraud, and Gilpin was one of many to come under its scrutiny. Findings of the group exonerated the governor of any wrong doing, but also rebuked him for fiscal carelessness. In the meantime, a group of prominent Colorado citizens submitted letters of

complaint and a petition for Gilpin's removal from office, directly to President Lincoln. As Gilpin was traveling back to Denver, Lincoln decided, that he'd had enough of eccentric behavior in Colorado, and ordered him replaced. John Evans of Illinois was named the second governor of the Territory. (1)

Official word of Gilpin's dismissal hit Denver on March 28, 1862. Undoubtedly the Governor saw Lincoln's action coming, but still the news was distressing. Holding himself blameless, Gilpin argued, that he was the victim of local politics. He didn't find any fault with the President, rather he placed the onus for his fall on two groups of men. One group thought, he shouldn't be trusted with anything. The other, he declared; "feared him as an able soldier who would set up a new 'Western Rocky Mountain Republic and would be harder to git rid of than Jeff Davis.'" (2)

Ironically, during the same week that Gilpin's career scraped rock bottom, he was also largely vindicated. A five month audit of army accounts was completed, and it was announced from Washington, that most classes of indebtedness would be immediately paid. Although the Treasury Department still disapproved of the Governor's vouchers, it was decided that the expenditures were legitimate, and that they were the reasonable responsibility of the government. The drafts were not recognized as currency, but original holders of Gilpin's paper, who could prepare itemized and verified accounts for their claims, would get their money. Better still, from Gilpin's perspective, came the news that his "Pet Lambs" had turned back the Confederate invasion at Glorieta Pass and that Sibley's army was in full retreat. This outcome would not have been possible had Gilpin been a man of less vision or zeal. (3)

These events scrubbed much of the tarnish off the ex-governor's reputation, but he was still out of a job. Strangely, his removal wasn't immediate. Evans was delayed in Washington, and, in a move of questionable legality, President Lincoln asked Gilpin to serve as governor pro-tem until he arrived. On May 1st, 1862, in one of his last acts as Colorado's chief executive, William Gilpin held a ceremony and issued a proclamation praising his volunteers for their triumphs in New Mexico and extending them the territory's "grateful admiration." Evans took office on May 16th. (4)

Gilpin was down, but he was by no means out. In October of 1862, calling himself the "Peoples candidate," he campaigned for a seat as one of Colorado's territorial delegates. Unfortunately, his ambitions exceeded his political acumen. Many holders of Gilpin's drafts had been paid, but there were many others who had not. "Every one of them which had passed from original hands and could not successfully be thrown back upon the person to whom it had been

issued became a total loss to the holder." Many Colorado businesses were still holding paper that was rendered worthless. In a three way race, Gilpin finished a weak third. (5)

Gilpin remained in Colorado for the next thirty years. His tenure as governor had lasted only one year, but it made him into one of the territory's lasting institutions. To some he was an honored spokesman and predictor, to others he was harebrained and impractical. Throughout the 1860's and 1870's he continued to be a force in Colorado politics. Especially active in attempts to achieve statehood for the territory, he very nearly became Colorado's first State Governor. In September of 1865, voters in the territory narrowly chose to request admission to the Union. In November, running on the Republican ticket, Gilpin was elected to be the new state's governor. Because of voting irregularities and because Colorado's constitution lacked Negro suffrage, the enabling act was defeated in the U.S. Congress. Colorado remained a territory until 1876 and William Gilpin remained a private citizen.

Over the years the ex-governor was quite successful at a variety of enterprises. Some, like land speculation and railroad construction, were staid. Others, like Gilpin himself were flamboyant. In 1872 he joined a handful of promoters in suggesting the existence of precious gem deposits in the San Juan Mountains, causing a short lived diamond rush. In 1875 he married a St. Louis widow, named Julia Pratte Dickerson. By the late 1870's he was the elder statesman of the Rockies. He attended most conventions, celebrations, and other public gatherings, but was no longer interested in political office. In 1887, he and Julia went through a very nasty and very public divorce, only to reconcile four years later.

Throughout his life Gilpin wrote prodigiously about the American West and its position in the world. Although, his works include "much sheer fantasy," many regard him as one of the foremost geopolitical thinkers of his time. Critics who have examined his writing have characterized him as: "a premier geopolitician, the most ambitious student of the Far West, an authority on the grasslands, and the creator of popular mythology about the Great American Desert." (6)

Contemporary evidence is sketchy, but it appears that William Gilpin was run down by a horse and buggy sometime in 1893. He appears to have recovered from the accident, but effects of it may have lingered. On January 19, 1894, he took a walk around town. As was his wont, he visited the statehouse. He spent his evening at home, quietly playing backgammon with his daughter. That night, the ex-governor died in his sleep. William Gilpin is buried at the Mount Olivet cemetery in Denver. (7)

Footnotes (See *The Road to Glorieta* for bibliography)

1. Karnes, William Gilpin, pp.280-292.
2. Ibid, p.292, As quoted in.
3. Whitford, Battle of Glorieta Pass, p.55.
4. Karnes, William Gilpin, Gilpin proclamation, May 1, 1862, Gilpin collection, Chicago Historical Society.
5. Whitford, Battle of Glorieta Pass, p.55; Karnes, William Gilpin, pp.300-301.
6. Ibid, pp.328-350.
7. Ibid, pp.339-340.



The Road to Glorieta; A Confederate Army Marches through New Mexico



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