

New Tijeras Canyon Open Space Growth and the Canyon's Role in the Civil War

This last October the City of Albuquerque closed on an additional 61 acres of Open Space land to our north and east. It is a large contiguous parcel that captures the missing triangular bit of space at the north end of the Manzano Open Space and continues eastward from the West Tijeras block along old Rt.66 to the stables in Carnuel, excepting the land the church sits on. This purchase is part of the continuing effort by the City and Bernalillo County to preserve a wildlife corridor through Tijeras Canyon. The Albuquerque One Open Space folks have not yet assigned a name to this land parcel. A map of the new area is posted on the FHVA.org website under the Open Space tab.

One interesting historical note about our area which you might find intriguing is that the end of the Civil War in New Mexico was fought here in Tijeras Canyon and in Albuquerque*. While digging through my geology texts on the region, I found several summaries of human history in our area and how the geology played a role. I had known about the many small local ancient pueblos and of the Spanish land grants in Tijeras Canyon, but I had not realized that some of the last battles of the Civil War were played out right here.

Following the Battle of Glorieta Pass, which was fought in the mountains southeast of Santa Fe on March 26-28, 1861, a portion of the Union army, led by Col. Canby, came up the Rio Grande from Ft. Craig (35 miles south of Socorro) and met the southward-retreating Confederate forces led by General H.H. Sibley in a brief artillery duel near Old Town on April 8, 1861. The next day, Col. Canby moved his Union troops east through Tijeras Canyon to set up a temporary base at "Carnuel Pass" (within Tijeras Canyon), in order to link up with additional Union troops coming down the east side of the Sandia Mountains from Ft. Union.

The combined Union forces then crossed back to the west, through Tijeras Canyon, to meet with the Confederate forces in a "sharp skirmish" at Peralta (just south of Albuquerque) on April 12, 1861. This appears to have been the last contact between the two armies. The two commands then each passed south, within sight of each other, with the Confederates along the west bank of the Rio Grande and the Union forces on the east. They marched south to the village of Bernardo where both sides camped, each still on opposite banks of the river. Here the Confederate forces, under the cover of night and leaving large fires burning to disguise their retreat, moved west and south through along the Rio Salado.

The Confederate soldiers then retreated to south of the Ladron Mountains, then west and north of the Magdalena Mountains and crossed the San Mateo Mountains to avoid Union-held Ft. Craig. Ultimately, the Southern forces lost so much of their artillery and supplies as they retreated southward toward El Paso, that they decided to retreat all the way back to San Antonio, Texas, rather than face additional battles. Curiously, it appears that the Union forces along the Southerners' route of retreat withdrew slightly to open a pathway that allowed the Confederates to retreat, instead of engaging them in combat.

* S. Wilson and R.A. Bieberman (1983) The Civil War in New Mexico: Tall Tales and True *in* New Mexico Geological Society Guidebook, Socorro Region II, pp.85-87.