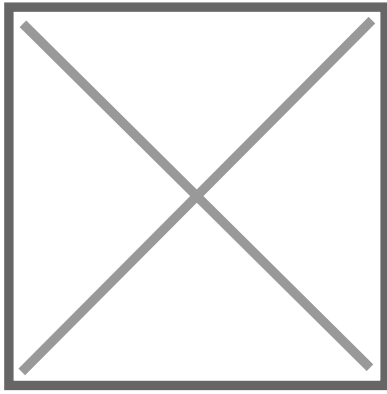
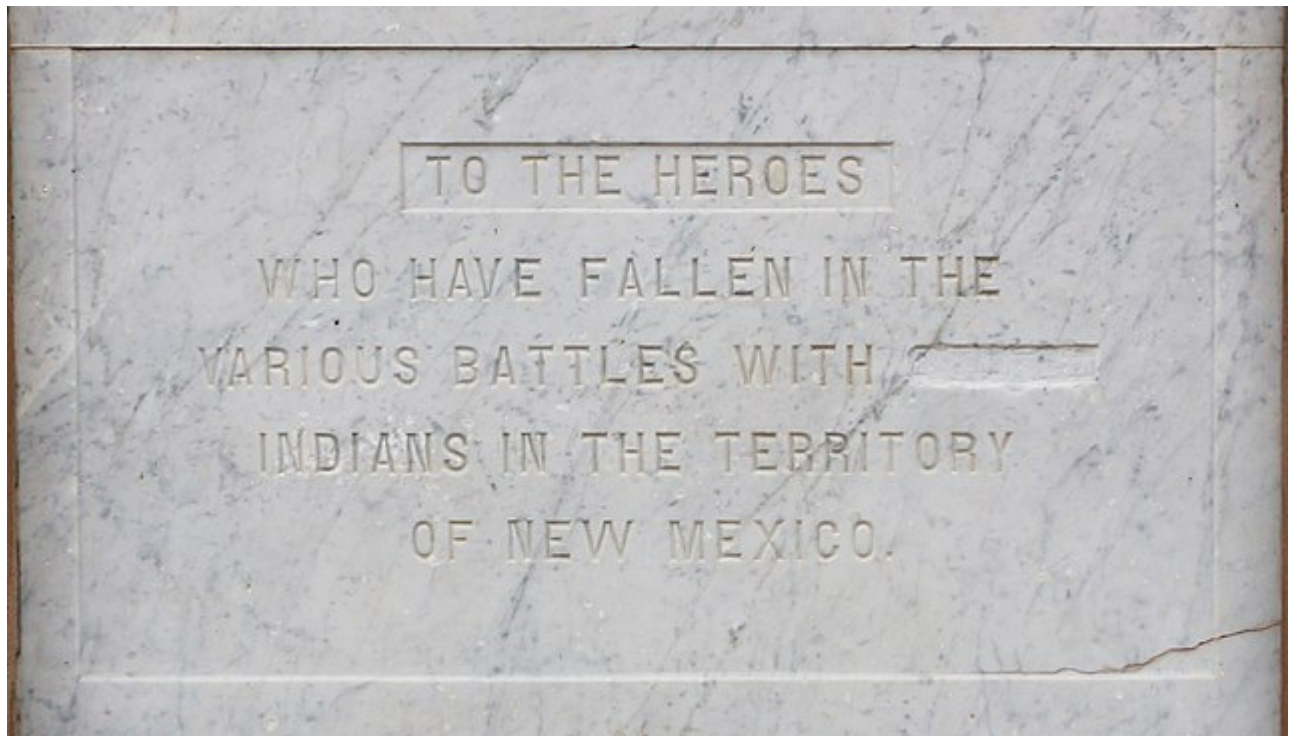




Making Sense of Santa Fe's Soldiers' Monument: Part Five

Description



Part Five: Controversies and Interventions

The first controversy that engulfed the Soldiers' Monument arose not from the reference to "savage Indians," but rather from the word "rebels." In 1909 a resolution was introduced in the New Mexico territorial legislature to replace the words "rebels" with the terms "confederates," on the basis that "the time has long since passed when terms of approbrium [sic] should be issued to designate our fellow citizens who then believed in the rights of the state of this Union to secede therefrom."^[1]

Former Territorial Governor Bradford Prince was incensed by this attempt to rewrite the text on the monument, telling the legislature that "to mutilate the engraving on a monument erected by a grateful people to commemorate the patriotism and heroism of their defenders, is not only absurd but almost sacrilegious; and

cannot fail to reflect on the judgment if not the loyalty of the perpetratorsâ!. You may mutilate the monument and blot out its words, but the Law will remain forever as proof of the sentiments of the people of New Mexico at that time.â He added, âIf there is a historic monument in the United States, it is that which stands in the center of the Plaza. It tells the story of loyalty and patriotism and valor; of faithfulness unto death.â^[2]

Here we find one of the earliest and most passionate examples of the defense of the monument which continue to be heard today: the monument is a memorial to the sacred memory of those who died to preserve the Union and defend New Mexico and it would border on sacrilege to alter a word of it. Princeâs address, however, failed to persuade the legislature; the resolution was adopted âafter an eloquent and patriotic address by [Councilman John Y.] Hewitt, who eulogized the bravery of the Confederates, only Prince voting no.â^[3]

Despite this vote, there is no record of any of these changes ever being made and words ârebelsâ remained on the plaques, a cause of continuing consternation on the part of some Southern sympathizers. In 1931, Texas native Gertrude Harris Cook wrote to the New Mexican, complaining that she and âseveral of my Texas visitors during the Fiesta have forgotten the Civil war over thereâ being too busy regulating our over-production of cotton and oilâ but being still southerners at heart, it seems strange to reach the ânorthâ in a single bound or a short dayâs drive, after passing through the eastern part of your state which is as much like Texas as if we had never sold it for ten millions, and then to reach the end of the trail and be called ârebels.â^[4]

Ms. Cook did not succeed in having the word ârebelsâ removed from the plaza monument, but the Texas Division of the Daughters of the Confederacy, who tirelessly promoted the myth of the Lost Cause, âa conception of a victimized South, fighting nobly for high Constitutional principles and defending a civilization of benevolent white masters and contented African slaves,â^[5] was successful in placing their own imposing stone monuments near the site of the Battle of Valverde in 1936 and the Battle of Glorieta in 1940 dedicated to the âmemory of the Texas Mounted volunteers, Sibley Brigade, C.S.A.â^[6]

The plaza underwent a transformation in the 1960s, led by Santa Feâs most important and influential architect, John Gaw Meem. In April of 1966, Meem presented a proposal to members of the Santa Fe Development Committee to revitalize the plaza by adding portals. In addition, the New Mexican reported, âTo alleviate what he described as âthe clutter of monument and bandstand,â Meem suggested removing the monument and building a new bandstand in its place.â In Meemâs view, âas a state monument it could be moved to an equally honorable place on the state capitol grounds.â^[7]

At least one notable Santa Fean was in favor of the proposal. Gustave Baumann wrote to the Santa Fe New Mexican:

I have no objection to a soldierâs monument even when built in the approved cemetery mood and becomes the focal point on the Santa Fe Plaza, the reason being that it was there when I came here more than forty years ago and decided Iâd like Santa Fe as it was, including the typographical error in the legend on the monument. However, giving the matter a second thought, Iâm inclined to agree with John Meemâs suggestion to move the monument to a place on the Capitol grounds.^[8]

But Meemâs proposal met with strong resistance from, among others, state archivist and historian Myra Ellen Jenkins, who wrote:

together with most citizens and visitors, I most heartily endorse Phase 1 of the proposed revamping of downtown Santa Fe. I am, however, equally opposed to the removal of the historical Soldiers' Monument to the present capitol on the grounds that to replace the monument with a bandstand (when we already have a bandstand) will add nothing esthetically to the plaza, will certainly add nothing to the capitol grounds and is historically invalid.

The Soldiers' Monument is a historical marker which was placed in front of New Mexico's most historical building, the Palace of the Governors, then the capitol, to commemorate events in 1862 when New Mexico was the battlefield for the Civil War of the West.¹ It was erected with funds appropriated by the Territorial legislatures of 1866-67-68 to reflect the Territory of New Mexico's feelings concerning the Civil War.²

The soldier's monument, including its somewhat unusual spelling, has been a historical landmark of Santa Fe for 103 years. With the interest aroused in recent years to save historical structures, it seems scarcely fitting to destroy the character of the plaza.³[\[9\]](#)

Here, Jenkins expresses a similar defense of the monument as was expressed by Governor Prince but focuses more on the historical value of the monument arising by virtue of having stood on the plaza for a century. Apparently, Meem was persuaded: when he presented "Phase II" of his plaza redevelopment plan in 1972, he proposed making the monument smaller rather than removing it altogether.[\[10\]](#)

It was during this same period that attention began to shift to focus on the tablet commemorating those who died fighting the "savage Indians." In 1973, the City Council, acting on a request from Governor Bruce King, precipitated by members of the American Indian Movement, "voted unanimously" to seek removal of the 105-year old Plaza monument on grounds it is "offensive" to Indians.⁴[\[11\]](#) State Historian Jenkins once again objected, scoffing "I think that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."⁵[\[12\]](#) John Gaw Meem also disapproved, telling the New Mexican: "I now feel very strongly that it should remain where it is. It's like an ugly child—you love it just as the same. Crude as it is, it is a reminder of our history, just as the Indians have reminders of theirs."⁶[\[13\]](#) The Santa Fe Historical Society threatened to go to court to stop the removal. Its president was quoted as saying that "The word savage, as used there, pertains to the marauding Indians, not to New Mexico's Indians."⁷[\[14\]](#)

Here we find one of the first expressions of the other defense of the monument that we still find today: an attempt to differentiate between so-called "civilized" Indians i.e., the Pueblo Indians who were sedentary, lived in villages, and practiced agriculture and the "wild" or "savage" Indians who were nomadic and "maurading." This distinction harkens back to the territorial period and earlier, when "savage" was used as a synonym for "uncivilized" or "non-sedentary." This language is found in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and in the instructions to Indian agent Calhoun. We also see this distinction made explicitly in *United States v. Ortiz*, a judicial decision written in 1867 by Chief Justice Slough, at the very time the Soldiers' Monument was under construction. In that case, Justice Slough "concluded that the Trade and Intercourse Act was not intended to apply to "civilized" tribes like the Pueblo Indians, who were different from the "savage and uncivilized" Indian tribes of the United States."⁸[\[15\]](#)

This distinction lasted very long indeed, and was expressed explicitly by the eminent Oliver La Farge who wrote in the Santa Fe New Mexican in 1963:

Newcomers might well be confused, but I am surprised that an old-timer such as Spud Johnson should think for a moment that the “savage Indians” referred to so sincerely on the north side of the monument meant the Pueblos. So far as I know, hostilities with the Pueblos ended not long after the bloody (not bloodless, as so often advertised) reconquest of New Mexico by De Vargas. From then until the Navajos were broken and signed the Treaty of 1868, Santa Fe and all New Mexico, including the Pueblos, were relentlessly harried, threatened with extinction, many pueblos and settlements wiped out, by Navajos, Apaches, Kiowas, and Comanches.

These were the “savage Indians.” No one even faintly conversant with New Mexico history could doubt to whom the territorial legislature was referring, or forget that Pueblo Indians were among the “heroes” who fought against them.[\[16\]](#)

As is evident from just these examples, there is a long history of referring to Native Americans generally, and nomadic tribes in particular, as savage in the meaning of non-sedentary. Patrick Wolf has examined this usage in his seminal work on settler colonialism, noting that “natives are typically represented as unsettled, nomadic, rootless, etc., in settler-colonial discourse”. The reproach of nomadism renders the native removable.[\[17\]](#) Moreover, as Wolf has noted, the expansion of agriculture, including the grazing of livestock, into Indigenous territory has the result that “Indigenous people are either rendered dependent on the introduced economy or reduced to the stock-raids that provide the class pretext for colonial death-squads” – a dynamic that describes the cycles of raids by Navajos, Apaches, Utes and Comanches, on the one hand, followed by violent reprisals by Spanish, Pueblo and Americans on the other hand that served then, and continues to serve, as justification for the “Indian wars” commemorated in the Soldiers’ Monument.[\[18\]](#)

The term “savage” then, whether understood as a synonym for non-sedentary or as a synonym for brutish, is a fundamental feature of the deliberate elimination of Indigenous societies through expropriation of territory, removal, mass killings, assimilation and other methods of elimination that took place in the New Mexico territory as it did elsewhere in the United States as it expanded across the continent. This terminology also connects, in a twisted way, the abolitionist element of the Civil War with the Indian Wars: the idea that Africans were “savages” was long used to justify slavery, as in South Carolina’s 1712 slave code which asserted that Africans had “barbarous, wild, savage natures, and such as renders them wholly unqualified to be governed by the laws, customs, and practices of this Province.”[\[19\]](#)

It was these considerations, perhaps, that motivated the City Council in 1973 to authorize the removal of the monument as “offensive.” Several months later, however, the City Council rescinded the vote at the request of the state planning officer, who stated that changing or removing the monument could jeopardize federal funds earmarked for the plaza renovation.[\[20\]](#) The state then ordered a plaque to be installed next to the monument, with the following explanatory text:

Monument texts reflect the character of the times in which they are written and the temper of those who wrote them. This monument dedicated in 1868 near the close of a period of intense strife which pitted Northerner against Southerner, Indians against White, Indian against Indian. Thus we see on this monument as in other records, the use of such terms as “savage” and “rebel.” Attitudes change and prejudices hopefully dissolve.[\[21\]](#)

This explanatory text is remarkably misguided. With respect to the memorialization of Union soldiers, it manages to erase the entire meaning of the Civil War and the intention of those who built the monument by turning it into an episode of abstract “strife” between North and South, without any effort to convey the true meaning of the

war. It then accomplishes what Southern partisans had been unable to achieve, by associating the word “rebel” as being equally as offensive as the word “savage,” thereby accomplishing the long-sought Confederate objective of rehabilitation. With respect to the memorialization of those heroes who fought the “savage Indians,” the text manages to miss the point entirely by identifying the “strife” as that by Indigenous people against whites, and by Indigenous peoples against other Indigenous peoples, rather than violence by whites against the Indigenous. And it concludes with an utterly banal bromide.

This plaque was not yet installed when, on Thursday August 8, 1974, a “young man, dressed in workman’s clothes and wearing a hard hat, entered the plaza at midmorning and chiseled from the monument” the word “savage.” [22] The man was described as “anglo, probably in his early 20s with long blond hair tied in a pony tail.” [23] State historian Myra Jenkins, suggested flippantly that an additional plaque be added: “This could say, “Defaced by unknown savages in 1974.” [24] Yet again, here is further confirmation that the term “savage” is anything but neutral.

The word “savage” was thus finally removed, but the sentiment that remained engraved on the monument “To the heroes who have fallen in the various battles with [?] Indians in the Territory of New Mexico” was no less inflammatory. These words continued to generate controversy and sporadic calls for the monument to be removed altogether. This is how matters stood until 2020, the year that saw statues fall.

The catalyst was the murder of George Floyd on the 25th of May. Long-held awareness of the tangible reminders of racially oppressive history and social structures seemed suddenly no longer able to be contained. The physical manifestations of racial hierarchy were no longer tolerable. They had to come down without further delay. Throughout the Southern states, Confederate statues, monuments and memorials were vandalized and toppled; many were removed by action of local officials either for safekeeping or in agreement that they were offensive. In addition, monuments symbolizing past injustice towards Native Americans, such as monuments commemorating Junipero Serra in California, were also either toppled or removed.

In New Mexico, the Three Sisters Collective called for “the complete removal of three racist and white supremacist statues that celebrate oppressors who led genocide and systemic oppression on the Indigenous Peoples of this region, and in particular, on the Pueblo People,” including the Soldiers’ Monument. [25] On June 18, 2020, Santa Fe Mayor Alan Webber issued an emergency proclamation ordering the immediate removal of one of the statues (Don Diego de Vargas) and ordering City officials to begin legal processes for the temporary removal of the Soldier’s Monument. The statue of Don Diego de Vargas was then removed, but the Soldier’s Monument remained in place until Indigenous People’s Day, October 12, 2020, when protesters toppled the obelisk with ropes and chains.

The toppling of the obelisk did not end the long-standing controversies over the meaning of the Soldiers’ Monument; on the contrary, the struggle to make sense the monument has only intensified as the city and its residents grapple with the decision whether to rebuild the monument or remove it once and for all. It is to that question we can now turn.

Next: [Making Sense of Santa Fe’s Soldiers’ Monument Part Six](#)

[1] “Change Approbrious Term,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, February 4, 1909.

[2] “The Plaza Monument,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, March 10, 1909.

[3] “To Build a Stone Arch,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, March 8, 1909.

[4] â??Queer Manners Not to Cover Up Word â??Rebelsâ?? to Avoid Insult to Outnumbering Texas Visitors,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, September 15, 1931.

[5] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), 278.

[6] And in 2009, the UDC sponsored plaques perpetuating Lost Cause mythology on the actual site of the Battle of Glorieta, to the shame of the National Park Service which permitted such propaganda at this historic, publicly owned location. See â??The Lost Cause Finds a Home at Glorieta Battlefield, posted July 9, 2022, <https://bienvenulaw.com/2022/07/09/the-lost-cause-finds-a-home-at-glorieta-battlefield>.

[7] â??Renovation of Historic Plaza Under Study,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, April 7, 1966.

[8] Gustave Baumann, letter to the editor, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, September 22, 1967.

[9] â??Archivist Opposes Plans to Change Santa Fe Plaza,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, October 1, 1967.

[10] â??Plaza changes presented to Santa Fe City Council,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, June 29, 1972.

[11] â??Plaza monument removal sought,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 26, 1973.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Oliver La Farge, â??Meaning of monument often overlooked,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 27, 1973.

[14] â??Plaza dispute may hit courts,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 27, 1973.

[15] Deborah A. Rosen, â??Pueblo Indians and Citizenship in Territorial New Mexico,â?• *New Mexico Historical Review* 78, no. 1 (2003), 9.

[16] â??Meaning of monument often overlooked,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 27, 1973. It is not clear why La Farge made this assertion, as the records do not seem to support the claim that Pueblo Indians were among those who were intended to be memorialized in this particular monument as â??heroesâ?• who died fighting the â??savage Indiansâ?• (though Pueblo Indians did at times participate with New Mexican settlers in raids against Navajos).

[17] Patrick Wolfe, â??Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,â?• *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006), 396.

[18] Quotations from Wolfe, *Settler colonialism*, 395.

[19] Paula S. Rothenberg, *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, Seventh Edition (New York: Worth Publishers 2007), 532

[20] â??Monument removal rescinded,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, September 27, 1973.

[21] â??New plaque for Plaza monument received,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, March 20, 1974.

[22] â??â??Savageâ?? is chiseled away,â?• *Roswell Daily Record*, August 9, 1974; see also, â??Anglo Chisels â??Savageâ?? From Santa Fe Monument,â?• *Gallup Daily Independent*, August 9, 1974.

[23] Ibid.

[24] "Savage" is chiseled away," • *Roswell Daily Record*, August 9, 1974.

[25] Three Sisters Collective Facebook page, accessed June 17, 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/threesisterscollective/posts/pfbid02DJnFZLtxJ7WdtER37E3x7Unz2pG3kmSEXfF6Nbv>

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