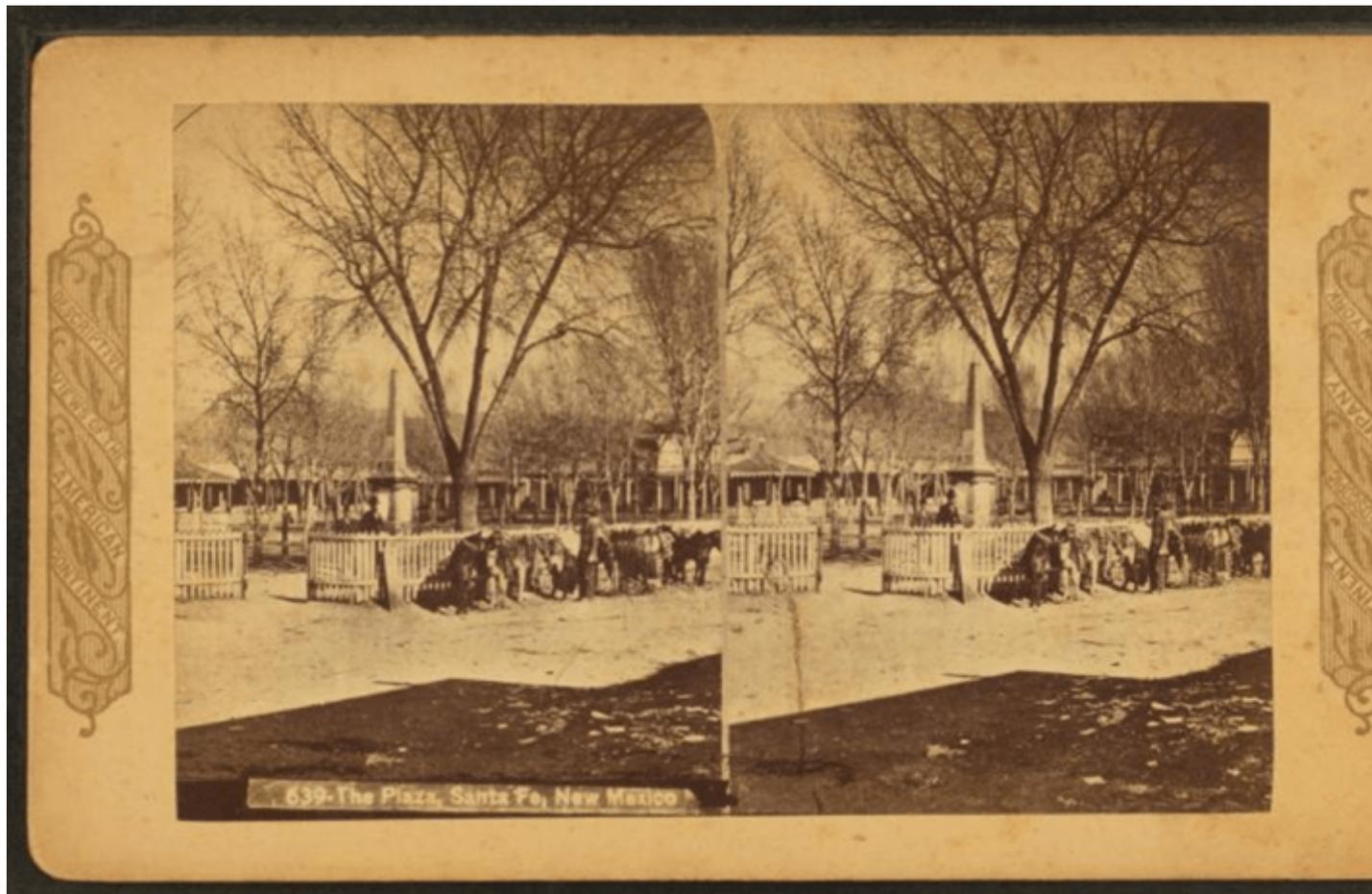




Making Sense of Santa Fe's Soldiers' Monument: Part One

Description



Every monument and memorial is a site of contested meaning. This is literally true in the case of Santa Fe's Soldiers' Monument. The monument presents a different message depending on which side one stands. Looking north in the direction of the Palace of the Governors, we read:

TO THE HEROES OF THE FEDERAL ARMY WHO FELL AT THE BATTLE OF VALVERDE FOUGHT WITH THE REBELS FEBRUARY [sic] 21, 1862.

And facing east, towards the Sangre de Cristo mountains, we read:

TO THE HEROES OF THE FEDERAL ARMY WHO FELL AT THE BATTLES OF CAÑON DEL APACHE AND PIGEON'S RANCHO (LA GLORIETA) FOUGHT WITH THE REBELS MARCH 28, 1862, AND TO THOSE WHO FELL IN THE BATTLE FOUGHT WITH THE REBELS AT PERALTA APRIL 15, 1862.

Facing these two tablets, we appear to have a straightforward monument to those who died fighting for the Union Army in four Civil War battles in 1862 New Mexico. Yet when we turn the corner and look south, we are faced with a quite different message. Engraved on the north-facing marble tablet (until 1974 when the word "savage" was chiseled off) we find the following:

TO THE HEROES WHO HAVE FALLEN IN THE VARIOUS BATTLES WITH THE SAVAGE INDIANS OF THE TERRITORY OF NEW MEXICO.

Here, in contrast to the other tablets, we are confronted with a jarring expression of what to modern ears rings of raw and unapologetic racism.

These divergent messages have fueled decades of debate and strife. For many, the inflammatory words commemorating "heroes" fighting "savage Indians" render the entire monument a celebration of colonialism, oppression, and genocide. Others have found the meaning of the monument in the tablets that soberly commemorate those who fought and died to preserve the union and defeat the expansion of slavery.

These conflicting interpretations came to a head on Indigenous People's Day 2020, when those who view the monument as a symbol of racist oppression toppled the obelisk. Since that day, the debate between these two views has continued to rage as the community attempts to come to agreement on what to do next. On one side are those who wish to complete the removal of the monument in order to eradicate its message of exclusion and conquest. For them, the Civil War tablets are invisible, or secondary to the overwhelming message of imperial conquest.

On the other side are those who wish to have the monument restored so that it may continue to honor the memory of their brave forebears who served in the Civil War, or simply as an important artifact of Santa Fe's history. For most of those on this side of the debate, the offensive south-facing tablet is a superfluous afterthought that can be removed.

What happens to the monument depends, or should depend, on which of these views is correct. If the monument is in fact a symbol of oppression and genocide, then its continued presence at Santa Fe's civic center would be indefensible. This would be true notwithstanding any claim to purely historical value: the National Trust for Historical Preservation supports the removal of historic monuments from public places "when they continue to serve the purposes for which many were built" to glorify, promote, and reinforce white supremacy, overtly or implicitly.^[1] If, on the other hand, the monument is primarily a tribute to Union soldiers in the Civil War, including native New Mexicans, then the case for restoration of this significant historic structure (with the offending language addressed through removal or explanation) would be overwhelming.

The monument's fate, in other words, rests on the actual historical facts regarding the monument's purpose and meaning. It is necessary, then, to have a clear understanding of: (1) the Civil War as it spilled into the Territory of New Mexico and the identity of those who fought and died in the battles referenced on the tablets; (2)

the genesis of the monument and the choice of texts; (3) what the "various battles with the savage Indians of the Territory of New Mexico" refers to; and (4) what the controversies that have swirled around the monument teach us about its meaning as it has evolved over time.

There is room for moral disagreement on what our history means. But in order to engage in moral discussion about our past, we must first have agreement on the basic historical facts. In making sense of the Soldiers' Monument, the place to begin is with the Civil War in the West.

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

[1] "National Trust for Historic Preservation Statement on Confederate Monuments," June 18, 2020, <https://savingplaces.org/press-center/media-resources/national-trust-statement-on-confederate-memorials#.Ydsbv11lC70>.