

G E O R G I A

BATTLEFIELDS

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Battlefield road trip

Picacho Peak State Park is about halfway between Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona. Within the park is an area commemorating a Civil War battle that occurred in the pass below. In Missouri, northern Virginia, and elsewhere, engagements between guerillas or partisans often involved greater numbers than did the fight in Picacho Pass, but this was the most significant battle between U.S. and Confederate forces in Arizona. <https://azstateparks.com/picacho/>

Before the war, many people in the southern part of New Mexico Territory felt the territorial government in Santa Fe was too far way to sufficiently address their concerns, and they feared more Indian attacks when several regular U.S. Army units were ordered east after Fort Sumter. Consequently, secession conventions in Mesilla and Tucson voted to create a Territory of Arizona (the land below the 34th parallel in what are now the states of New Mexico and Arizona) and join the Confederacy. Confederate forces from El Paso, Texas, marched into this area in July 1861 and established a territorial capital at Mesilla, in what is now New Mexico. The ultimate objective was to advance on California and seize gold mines and western ports. The obvious route was the Butterfield Overland Stage Road that ran through Tucson and on to San Diego and Los Angeles. This route was used by the Mormon Battalion on its 1846 march during the Mexican War and by some 49ers during the Gold Rush.

When news of the Confederate invasion of New Mexico Territory reached U.S. Army General-in-Chief McClellan in December 1861 (news traveled slowly over such a distance), he ordered that U.S. forces in California counter the Confederate advance. In Los Angeles, Colonel James Carleton assembled a force of about 2,350 regulars and volunteers. Carleton realized that a force of that size could not march as a unified body because water along the route was scarce, so he sent supplies to be positioned along the way and dispatched his force in detachments so that wells and water holes could recharge between arrivals.

In February 1862, Confederate Brigadier General Henry Sibley advanced north from El Paso along the Rio Grande with a force of 2,500 men, mostly Texans. Sibley's ultimate objective was the gold and silver mines of Colorado, and he hoped to supply his column by capturing the U.S. depots at Fort Craig and Fort Union. In conjunction with Sibley's advance, the Confederate Territorial Governor of Arizona dispatched a force of about 100 men to seize Tucson. A detachment--disguised as civilians, which wasn't difficult given the lack of uniforms--advanced beyond Tucson along the Stage Road to get information about the advancing U.S. column. They met a U.S. scouting party and gained important information before revealing themselves, capturing a captain and a few troopers, and destroying U.S. supplies. The Confederates got as far west as Stanwix stage station on 30 March 1862, then retreated after an exchange of fire with another U.S. scouting party.

Colonel Carleton advanced from Fort Yuma, on the California border, in early April 1862. On 15 April, Captain William Calloway planned to capture the Confederate outpost at the Picacho Pass stage station by sending 13 men under Lieutenant James Barrett around mountains to the east and 12 men under Lieutenant Ephraim Baldwin around Picacho Peak to the west. The two detachments were to take positions behind the Confederates and wait for Calloway to attack with 200 men, but Barrett disregarded orders and attacked the ten Confederates. His men quickly captured three Confederates before the shooting began. Barrett was the first to be killed. The firing continued for over an hour among the mesquite bushes before the U.S. troopers withdrew with two dead, one mortally wounded, and three others wounded. The Confederate scouts held the field and are considered the victors because they prevented a surprise attack upon Tucson, but reinforcements for the Confederates weren't going to come. Although Sibley defeated a U.S. force on 28 March at Glorieta, east of Santa Fe, a mounted unit of Colorado volunteers circumvented the battlefield and destroyed the bulk of the Confederate supplies, wagons, horses and mules; and by mid-April, Sibley's force was in retreat towards El Paso. The Confederates abandoned Tucson on 4 May, and the Confederate threat in the southwest was over.

There are no earthworks to preserve from this battle among the mesquite, and evidence of the overland stage route was largely obliterated by the construction of paved roads and I-10, but

Picacho Peak State Park on the western side of the valley has stone monuments for the Mormon Battalion that camped in the area on 19 December 1846 and the six U.S. Army casualties from the 15 April 1862 fight. It also has a mountain howitzer to recognize the U.S. artillery deployed there after the Confederate withdrawal, plus several interpretive markers. It was a small battle, but the monuments and markers provide a good understanding of what occurred.

For more on the action at Picacho Pass, see American Battlefield Trust web site entries:

<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/picacho-peak>

<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/clash-picacho-peak>

For books about Confederate invasion of the southwest, see Part I of the late Alvin Josephy's [The Civil War in the American West](#). For the fight known as the Gettysburg of the West, see the late Don Albert's [The Battle of Glorieta](#). A recent book that addresses not only U.S. versus C.S. forces in the southwest but also those two versus Apaches and Navajos and intertribal warfare is Megan Kate Nelson's [The Three-Cornered War](#).



Marker featuring photo of the valley with troop movements overlaid.



Civil War Trail marker.



Marker about the U.S. v. C.S. fight.



1937 monument about Mormon Battalion's Mexican War march.



Cannon represents U.S. artillery posted after the fight.



U.S. troops also fought Apaches.



Plaque on the 1928 monument (in photo at right) to U.S. casualties.



In the 1880s, one U.S. and one Confederate veteran of the Arizona campaign jointly founded Phoenix, now the fifth most populous city in the U.S.

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