

Indian Wars in Arizona – Part I

The Indian Wars in Arizona might be the most traumatic period in modern Arizona history, with many effects still felt today. The height of the Arizona Indian wars began around 1849, with the influx of settlers and miners and those lured by the California Gold Rush. The open warfare lasted until 1886, with the surrender of the Apache chief Geronimo. While there would continue to be irritations and conflicts, significant armed warfare ended with Geronimo's surrender. Robert Utley, in his *Clash of Cultures* tells us, "In all the wars of the North American continent the European invader encountered no more formidable adversary than the Apache warrior."

The next two articles will cover this important and complex period. This first article will discuss the Wars from roughly 1849 until 1871, when President Grant personally appointed General George Crook to be Arizona military commander.

For simplicity in these two narratives, "Arizona" will refer to people and events within the boundaries of present-day Arizona and the details of this history will focus on the most active Native American bands or tribes.

One major consideration of the Indian Wars was which government was responsible for the homelands of the Indians. The Gadsden Purchase of 1854 was the last land acquisition to create the territory that became the contiguous 48 United States. The purchase was at least partly motivated by the desire of the US Government for a southern transcontinental railroad link. The Purchase also extended the southern border of Arizona south of the Gila River to the present-day Mexican border (see graphic below). However, the newly acquired land included some Apache bands, especially the Chiricahua Apaches, who fought longest and hardest against the new territorial government.



As the settlers and prospectors pushed into Arizona, and up against the indigenous tribal groups, the tribes pushed back. The Navajos in northern Arizona, the various tribes in the center, and the Chiricahua Apaches in the south all coped with the newcomers in different ways. But in the end, the newcomers were just too numerous and too relentless for the tribes to resist and the Indians made uneasy, individual peace agreements.

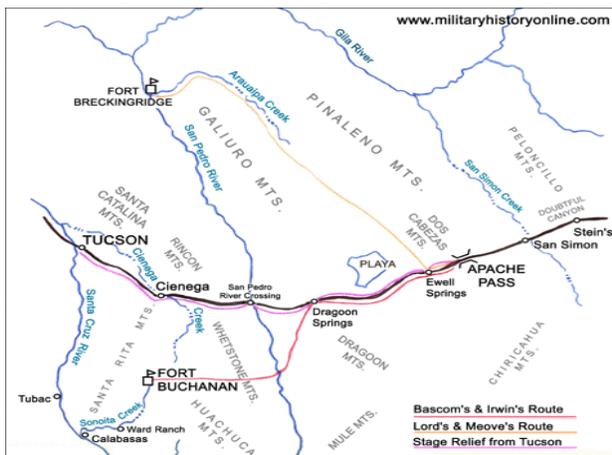
The onrush of newcomers increased about 1849, as the California Gold Rush led as many as 50,000 miners to travel across the region. Some stayed in Arizona to work the newly

discovered Arizona mines. Mining opportunities and the availability of land combined to cause yet more Arizona population growth.

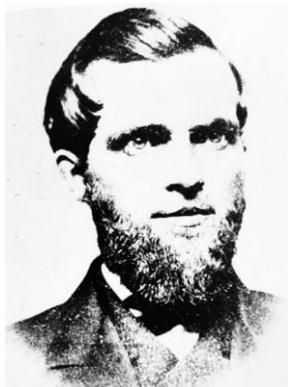
By 1858, new stage lines to link east and west would cross Chiricahua territory. Nevertheless, Cochise biographer Edwin Sweeney in his new book, *Cochise: Firsthand Accounts of the Chiricahua Apache Chief*, relates, "In the late 1850's when Americans first arrived in his country, he [Cochise] tried to keep peace with them. For the next few years a tenuous peace prevailed...with Cochise keeping peace with the Americans who lived in Apache Pass at the Butterfield Overland Company's Stage Station."

In fact, Cochise maintained relatively peaceful relations with the Americans until the infamous "Bascom Affair" in 1861, when a rancher accused Cochise of kidnapping his son. This accusation and its aftermath would make the formidable Cochise an implacable foe of the whites for more than a decade to follow.

As we hear from Sweeney (in both his references), and from David Roberts in his *Once They Moved Like the Wind*, the Bascom Affair began with an incident in January 1861. Raiding Indians attacked the ranch of John Ward south of Tucson (see map below), plundered his house, kidnapped his son Felix Ward, and made off with his stock. Ward was absent at the time of the raid. Upon his return and learning of the raid, he immediately rode to Fort Buchanan, twelve miles to the northeast, and reported the incident to the Commanding Officer. Ward suspected the Cochise Apaches because of their recent activity in the area.



The Fort Buchanan commander ordered an inexperienced Second Lieutenant, George N. Bascom (see sketch below), to proceed to Apache Pass (see map at left) in Chiricahua territory, 150 miles to the Northeast, to retrieve Ward's son and his stolen livestock.





The "Bascom Affair" passed into the Apache oral tradition and was known loosely as "cut the tent." This story would be told around campfires for years. By either name it would touch off more than ten years of bloody conflict between Cochise and the US Army. In 1970, according to historian David Roberts, an ethno-historian surveyed Chiricahua Apache descendants living in Oklahoma and New Mexico and discovered a remarkable fact: Many more of them remembered the Bascom Affair of 1861 than remembered the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

While the real impact of the Bascom Affair on Apache conflicts is still debated by historians, the Apaches remembered it. Edwin Sweeney says that "Bascom's mistreatment of him [Cochise] remained part of his psyche for the rest of his life..." and that Cochise himself said that he "...went to war only after Americans had hanged his brother and two nephews." Ironically, as Turner points out, Bascom himself did not even agree with the hanging that helped to attach his name to this dark event.

Both sides mentioned the Bascom Affair in explaining later actions. The encounter seemed to illustrate the difficulties the whites and the tribes had in relating to each other. For example, the two sides spoke very different languages. The language of the Chiricahua Apaches was very unique and difficult for most European peoples to learn. Hardly any whites could make sense of it and few could speak any of it. So when Apaches and whites conversed in Apache language, it was through an interpreter of uncertain skill and intent. The two sides would also try to communicate in Spanish, passed down from Indian experience over centuries of Spanish and Mexican contacts.

Nor were all Indians and bands or tribes the same. As Terry Mort describes in *The Wrath of Cochise*, the Chiricahua Apaches shared some cultural traits and bloodlines with other Apache bands, but were not closely bound in their governing practices. Conversely, the whites, especially the military, often followed laws or regulations. The Apaches, who call themselves Nnēē or "the People," are made up of several groups, including Cochise's Chiricahua Apaches.) These groups are then divided into numerous bands, each of which takes its name from a particular geographic locale. In this way, Apache identity is closely woven with place. The Apache concept of *Ni'* – or integration of the mind with the life force of the land – speaks to this deep connection. Historian Jim Turner reminds us that the Apaches were not yet socially structured enough to maintain large social units such as tribes or nations.

So an attack by Apaches on Ward's ranch, for example, did not necessarily involve Cochise, nor would he necessarily even know of it. Time and again, these differences caused immediate and overblown reactions with disastrous results, such as with Bascom.

On the other side, the white officers had been trained to fight set-piece battles, sometimes with thousands of participants. The Apaches used small-unit tactics and avoided direct confrontations in the field when possible. The white soldiers in the imminent Civil War were trained to ride to the sound of the guns and often faced their opponents openly from

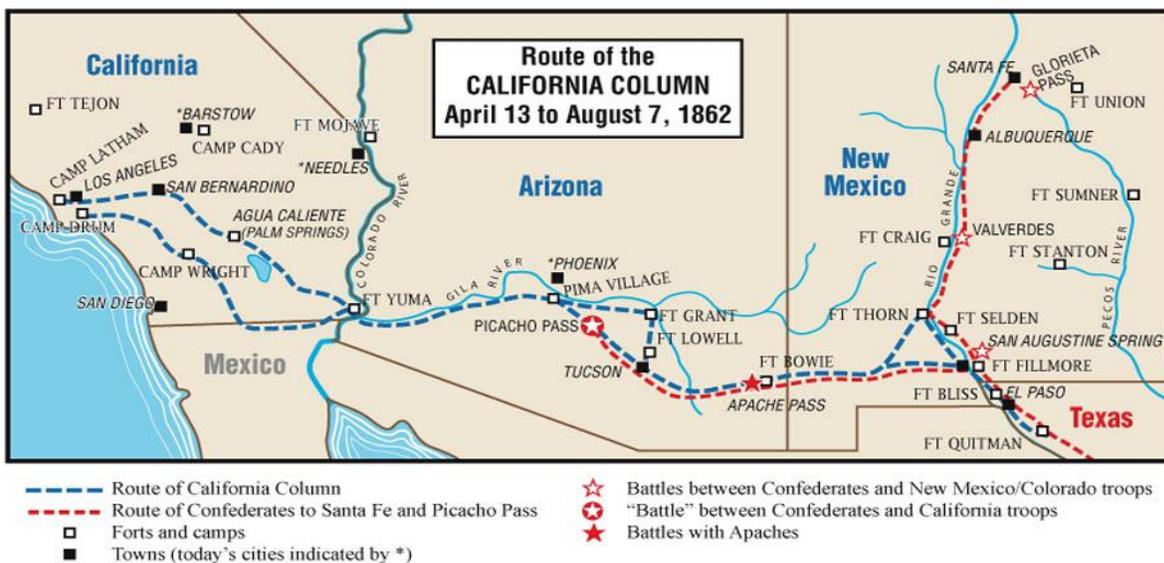
firing lines and squared formations. The Apache ways, at least at first, completely baffled the white soldiers, and vice versa.

Then, as Roberts tells us, just months after the Bascom Affair, in the summer of 1861, the “White Eyes” began to leave Arizona. Ranchers deserted their spreads, budding mining camps turned into ghost towns, and the Butterfield stage line ceased its service. In July, all the soldiers left Fort Breckenridge north of Tucson and Fort Buchanan near the Mexican border. They burned their forts and headed to New Mexico.

The Apaches believed they had driven the soldiers out of the country and rejoiced. Their medicine had worked. Mines, ranches and towns were deserted, all stock stolen, and dozens of citizens were killed. Tucson was only one of three major sites that held out against the Indians. The other sites included the Patagonia Silver Mine, owned by Sylvester Mowry, and the Pete Kitchen Ranch, both south of Tucson and just north of the Mexican border.

Everything seemed to be going well for the Arizona Indians. They could resume their old ways uninterrupted. Life was better, if not good. But then strange news came from the east. Some Mescaleros had seen white soldiers wearing gray uniforms and carrying an unknown flag. The US Civil War had arrived in the Southwest. The war had emptied the Arizona forts as Union soldiers went east to fight. But the vacuum would bring gray-uniformed Confederates to Arizona, who hoped to fill the void and link the southern Confederacy to California.

No sooner had the Confederates settled into Arizona, but a much larger and more seasoned Union force would arrive from California. The arriving force, called the California Column (see graphic below) and commanded by steely Col. James H. Carleton, quickly pushed the smaller Confederate force out of Arizona and all the way back to the Rio Grande. Along the way, often sticking to deserted stage routes and stations, Carleton established or reopened forts to protect his supply lines and local settlers.



The Indians watched in confusion as the White Eyes seemed to have divided into two

armies, one blue and one gray, and were fighting each other! Nevertheless, the tribes took advantage of opportunities to attack both the Union and Confederate troops.

In 1863, with the Confederates gone and his supply routes secure, newly promoted Brigadier-General Carleton, now overall Commander of Union forces in the area, turned his attention to the Navajos and Apaches. Hampton Sides, writing in *Blood and Thunder*, says that Carleton seemed especially eager to force the Navajos onto a reservation he envisioned at a place called Bosque Redondo, a reservation near Fort Sumner in eastern New Mexico. (Bosque Redondo is Spanish for "round forest"—in New Mexican Spanish, a *bosque* means a river-bottom forest usually containing cottonwood trees.) Carleton had discovered Bosque Redondo on an earlier mapping mission and considered it an oasis. No one else thought so.

Hampton Sides suggests Carleton turned his attention to the Navajos in response to rising civilian calls to stop persistent Navajo raids in the area. This clamor fed into a long simmering fixation Carleton had with the Navajos and his desire to "solve the Navajo problem." Sides also suggests that Carleton was seeking to advance his military career. Carleton would hint to his superiors back east that there might be gold in the Navajo lands (although the source of Carleton's estimate is unclear). To ensure the safety of incoming miners and prospectors, the Navajos would have to be removed. Carleton would now be on a mission to subdue the formidable Navajos.

General Carleton ordered Colonel Kit Carson, a widely acknowledged Indian fighter and a friend of Carleton's, to conduct a "scorched earth" expedition into Navajo land to force their surrender. Although Carson was privately appalled by these orders, he and his forces swept through Navajo land, attacking the Navajos and destroying their crops, livestock, and dwellings. It would prove to be a precisely executed and decisive military operation. Facing starvation and death, the last group of Navajo warriors surrendered at Canyon de Chelly and was taken to Fort Defiance for internment on July 20, 1863.

Beginning in the spring of 1864, around 9,000 remaining Navajo men, women and children were forced to embark on the "Long Walk," a trek of over 300 miles to Fort Sumner, New Mexico (see map below). Sides recounts: "One Navajo elder said of the Long Walk: You ask how they treated us? If there was room, the soldiers put the women and children on the wagons. Some even let them ride behind them on their horses. I have never been able to understand a people who killed you one day and on the next played with your children...."



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The internment at Bosque Redondo was difficult for the Navajos. Many died there because the climate was so different from northeastern Arizona, the soil was miserable, and the Pecos River water was too alkaline to drink safely. The land was so deforested the Navajo women had to walk twelve miles to find firewood. In addition, a small group of Mescalero Apaches, long enemies of the Navajos, had been relocated to the same area and further antagonized the Navajo.

Years later, in June 1868, the government realized the internment effort was a failure. A treaty was negotiated between Navajo leaders and the Federal government allowed the surviving Navajos to return to a reservation

on a portion of their former homeland. As a precaution, the United States military continued to maintain forts on the Navajo reservation in the years following the Long Walk. The Navajos would continue to suffer economic injustices, but the day of the large armed conflicts were over.

By treaty, the Navajos were allowed to leave the reservation for trade with permission from the military or local Indian agent. The arrangement led to a gradual end of Navajo raids, as the tribe was able to increase the size of livestock and crops. In addition, the tribe was able to increase the size of the Navajo reservation, sometimes through legal action, from 3.5 million acres to the 16 million acres it owns today.

Today the Navajo reservation (see map below) is the largest land area retained by a U.S. tribe. It is larger than ten of the 50 US states and it is governed via agreements with the United States Congress as a sovereign Indian nation.



Meanwhile in central Arizona, the government had entered into arrangements with the Pima and Maricopa tribes to protect the settlers and miners. As long as the settlers were just passing through, the protection Pimas and Maricopas provided for the white supply trains was sufficient. Pimas and Maricopas fulfilled this need with regular punitive raids against the Apaches several times a year. They would keep the Apaches away from Pima lands, but stopped short of attacking their enemies' mountain rancherías (farm/camps).

However, as the Pimas and Maricopas helped protect the settlers and miners, more whites began flooding into the area and staying. Ironically, the success of the Pimas and Maricopas brought more settlers encroaching on nearby land and the government would sometimes need to settle the resulting disputes. The incoming settlers also pushed up against the Apache bands. In response, the bands would push back and would also raid the newcomers for food and plunder.

To help cope with this threat, the California Volunteers established Fort McDowell on the Verde River in 1865 (see graphic below). It was named for Major General Irvin McDowell, a Civil War veteran and one-time commander of local military forces. The fort was built to be near the area's travel routes in an effort to protect the routes from the Apache raiders.



In addition to being near the Salt and Verde rivers, Fort McDowell was in close proximity to a number of trails important to the Apache of central Arizona. From this base, the installation conducted numerous military exercises against the Tonto Apache and other nearby bands.

Meanwhile, reservations were beginning to be established. As early as 1859, according to David Roberts, the government had established a reservation for Pima and Maricopa Indians

along the Gila River just south of present-day Phoenix. Yet by 1871, no official reservation for Apaches had been established. In the years after 1866, five temporary “feeding stations” had been set up near Arizona military camps. In their dealings with these stations, the Apache tribes gradually seemed to grow accustomed to the idea of reservations. In exchange for settling near an army camp and agreeing not to raid or steal, the Indians accepted rations, clothing, and protection from lawless white settlers.

Increasing numbers of Apaches, mostly from the White Mountain, San Carlos, and Tonto tribes, entered into this quid pro quo, at least temporarily. There was good reason to follow this arrangement. The rapid spread of settlers across Arizona made it increasingly difficult to make their living from the land. Despite perceived progress in living with the local tribes, the incoming settler numbers would continue to strain white and tribal relationships.

But despite the settling of the Navajos and some less warlike Indian groups in central Arizona, the Indian Wars in Arizona were far from over. Our next article will take us through the resulting conflicts ending with the surrender of Apache warrior Geronimo.

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