

Charles Bent, Biographical Sketch

Born: 1799 - Died: 1-19-1847

Photos



by William H. Wroth

Charles Bent was the first civil governor under American rule in the territory of New Mexico. Bent was born in Charleston, Brooke County, Virginia (now West Virginia) in 1799 and moved with his family to St. Louis, Missouri in 1806. Although Bent and his brothers were to become the stereotypic traders and mountain men of the West, their father Silas Bent, originally from Massachusetts, was a prominent land surveyor and Supreme Court judge for the Missouri Territory. Charles Bent attended college for a brief time at Jefferson College in Cannonsburg, Pennsylvania. He then began working for the Missouri Fur Company in 1822, probably fur trading on the upper Missouri River. In 1825 he became a partner with Joshua Pilcher in a re-organization of the company. In 1827 he and his partners traveled to the Green River on a trapping and trading expedition, but the company was not very successful in competing with the American Fur Company. As a result, Bent turned his attention to the Santa Fe trade.

Accompanied by his younger brother William Bent in 1829, he led a very profitable trading expedition over the Santa Fe Trail to New Mexico. In 1830 Charles Bent went into business with Ceran St. Vrain, a trapper and trader from St. Louis who had settled in Taos in 1826. Their firm, Bent and St. Vrain, became one of the leading mercantile establishments of the West, with annual proceeds in the fur trade alone of over \$40,000. In the 1830s they were second only to the American Fur Company, and in 1838 they formed a cartel with that company to dominate the trade on the upper Missouri and the Northwest.

In 1833 William Bent built a stockade for his trade goods on the Arkansas River near the site of present-day Pueblo, Colorado. Within a few months St. Vrain and Charles and William Bent moved the site down the river to a new location near the junction of the Arkansas and Purgatory rivers, close to today's La Junta, Colorado. Bent's Fort, as it is known today, was built of adobe bricks by Hispanic masons from New Mexico. In a rectangular form, it was surrounded by protective walls and had a round lookout tower on one corner. More than 170 feet in length and almost as wide, it was one of the largest structures to be built in the Rocky Mountain West at the time. It became one of the most important outposts on the Santa Fe Trail. Located just across the Arkansas which was then the border of Mexico, it became the staging ground for both trading and later military expeditions into New Mexico. It also served as a trading center for the Cheyenne, Arapaho and other Plains Indian tribes.

Bent and St. Vrain also maintained smaller forts for trading purposes in the North and they had stores in Taos and Santa Fe. Their business was not limited to trapping and fur trading but included the sale of mercantile goods from the eastern United States, supplied by Bent's regular trading expeditions to and from Missouri. By 1835 Bent had settled in Taos and married a

Taoseña, María Ignacia Jaramillo, with whom he had five children. Bent was later connected by marriage to Kit Carson who in 1843 married Josefa Jaramillo, the younger sister of María Ignacia.

As a wealthy merchant in Taos, Bent often acted in a high-handed manner and his arrogant view of the Hispanic people of New Mexico no doubt contributed to his making enemies. In letters to American colleagues and officials he constantly expressed his condescending view of the local people: "they have no opinion of their own, they are entirely governed by the powers that be, they are without exception the most servile people that can be imagined..... The Mexican character is made up of stupidity, obstinacy, ignorance, duplicity and vanity." In 1841 he became involved in a bitter lawsuit in Taos with Juan Vigil, during which Bent and his colleague William Workman entered Vigil's home and accused him of making false statements. Workman whipped Vigil as Bent stood by watching in approval, and a week later four masked men, most likely hired by Bent and Workman, threatened Vigil's home causing him to flee. Later that year Bent was arrested in Taos for alleged complicity in the Texas Santa Fe expedition and was sent under armed guard to Santa Fe. The United States consul, Manuel Alvarez, appealed to Governor Armijo and obtained his release, with Taos authorities acknowledging a mistake had been made. It is likely that the "mistake" was a form of retribution for his treatment of Vigil. Meanwhile Workman, also accused of complicity in the Texan expedition, sold all his goods and fled to California, never to return to New Mexico.

Another formidable opponent of Charles Bent was Father Antonio José Martínez who was a member of one of the most prominent Hispanic families in Taos and a vocal spokesman for the rights of the local people. Martínez was well aware of the intentions of some of the Americans to acquire large parcels of land in northern New Mexico. When in 1841 Governor Manuel Armijo approved a large grant on the east side of the mountains to Charles Beaubien and Guadalupe Miranda (Armijo's secretary), one-quarter interest in the grant was also given surreptitiously to Charles Bent. Martínez heard of the approval of the Beaubien-Miranda grant (later called the Maxwell land grant), and he protested against the granting of such vast lands to two foreigners, Beaubien and Bent. He stated, with the support of Taos Pueblo leaders, that the grant illegally included traditional communal grazing and hunting lands of the Pueblo. He also stated that the grant was detrimental to the Hispanic people of the Taos area and that the lands should be available to poor farmers for grazing. However, the grant was not invalidated by Armijo, perhaps because he too owned one-quarter interest in it. When a later governor invalidated the grant, Beaubien falsely denied that Bent was a partner, and the Departmental Assembly re-instated it, again placing Beaubien, Miranda, and their associates in possession. However, after the death of Bent, Lucien Maxwell in order to gain full possession of the grant had to buy Bent's one-quarter interest from his heirs.

With the outbreak of the Mexican-American War in May 1846, Stephen Watts Kearny was made Brigadier-General and given the task of leading United States forces to New Mexico and California. In August Kearny and his Army of the West invaded the Mexican territory of New Mexico and took possession of the city of Santa Fe without a fight, as Governor Manuel Armijo had retreated to Chihuahua, rather than engage in battle. With this easy victory the territory seemed to be pacified and the residents seemingly welcomed or were resigned to the American occupation. In September, Kearny appointed a first slate of territorial officials under United States administration, headed by Charles Bent as governor. Kearny may have met with Bent in St. Louis the previous May, and on the return of his expedition to Wyoming in July 1845 he stopped for provisioning at Bent's Fort where he met with both Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain. Bent most likely impressed him with his knowledge of affairs in New Mexico and his

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position of economic power in that territory. Two days after appointing Bent to the position of governor, Kearny went on to California, leaving Colonel Sterling Price and a smaller contingent of troops in Santa Fe to maintain the peace.

In spite of the peaceful occupation of the territory, many New Mexicans were not at all pleased with the new regime. They resented the invasion, the loss of sovereignty, and loss of direct contact with Mexico. Some were afraid of losing their land (and in fact later many of them did) and the occupying American soldiers and their ethnocentric attitudes were a continual source of friction. In December 1846 members of some leading families in Santa Fe and Albuquerque began plotting a rebellion to take back control of New Mexico. Two of their leaders were Diego Archuleta and Tomás Ortiz. Archuleta was a military officer and son of Juan Andrés Archuleta, the former military commander of New Mexico; Ortiz was the brother of the vicar of Santa Fe, Father Juan Felipe Ortiz.

Governor Bent and Colonel Price received word of the elaborate plans of the conspirators before any actions occurred, and seven of them were arrested, but both Archuleta and Ortiz escaped. Bent was concerned with the escape of the ringleaders and requested that no more American troops leave New Mexico as had been planned. Artillery was placed around the Santa Fe plaza and guard patrols were increased on the streets. The plotters had been counting on rumors of Mexican victories in Chihuahua which they thought would bring a sizeable force of Mexican soldiers north to New Mexico. At the beginning of January word reached Santa Fe that in fact Colonel A. W. Doniphan's troops had been victorious in Chihuahua, and there would be no possibility of support from the south for the rebels. Colonel Price later wrote to Washington: "The rebellion appeared to be suppressed." Governor Bent issued a proclamation concerning the failed rebellion in which he noted: "some foolish and imprudent men ...were urged to follow the standard of rebellion. Their treason was discovered in time and smothered at its birth." He further noted: "What help could the department of Chihuahua, which is torn by factions and reduced to insignificance, afford you? Certainly none." He urged the citizenry to support his government, claiming he was their "best friend."

Governor Bent was now confident that this was the end of the rebellion. On January 14 1847 he traveled to his home in Taos without military accompaniment, not expecting any trouble. But early in the morning of January 19 a newly-formed group of Hispanic and Taos Indian rebels under the leadership of Pablo Montoya, a vecino of Taos, and Tomás (Tomasito) Romero, a Taos Pueblo member, broke into Bent's house and killed him, along with his brother-in-law Pablo Jaramillo, Taos sheriff Stephen Lee, Judge Cornelio Vigil, attorney J.W. Leal, and Narciso Beaubien, the nineteen-year-old son of Charles Beaubien. The murder of Governor Bent and his colleagues shocked the Americans into immediate action. Colonel Price began to march north on January 23, and at the same time the rebels were marching south with the intention of attacking Santa Fe. He met them near Santa Cruz de la Cañada and with superior force of arms caused them to scatter and retreat. A smaller battle took place near Embudo on January 27 with the same result. On February 3 Price marched through the town of Taos without opposition and routed the rebels in the Taos Pueblo. Many of the rebel leaders were captured, given a quick trial and executed, but the rebellion dragged on for another six months in eastern New Mexico before its final end in July 1847.

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