

FIFTH ARTICLE IN THE SERIES -- FREE STATE OF SOCORRO 1953-2003

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GOVERNOR MANUEL ARMIJO THE SOCORRO CONNECTION

When Socorro was under Mexican control from 1821 to 1848, the last Governor of New Mexico was Manuel Armijo. He was forced to resign upon the arrival of the U.S. First Dragoons, commanded by Colonel Kearny. When Kearny's men entered Santa Fe in late 1846, Governor Armijo peacefully resigned to avoid a bloody confrontation between the large army of the Dragoons and his small Mexican militia. He then fled Santa Fe, fearing he would be killed by the occupying Army. Mexico did little to support Governor Armijo against the American forces, leaving him with the feeling he had been betrayed by his country. Finally convinced that his fate was not in jeopardy by the U.S. Army, he returned to his family home on the sovereign Socorro Land Grant, where he felt he would be safe. He lived the rest of his life at his residence and ranch in Lemitar.

Armijo died in 1853, seven years after the American Occupation of New Mexico. In Armijo's last will and testament, he clearly specified where he wished to be buried. "I direct that when God shall be pleased to take me from this to the eternal life, my body be buried in my parish church, San Miguel del Socorro." Records at the San Miguel Church in Socorro has the following entry: "I, father Don Nicolas Valencia, hereby record in the death register the burial of the corpse of Manuel Armijo. ... I buried him in the church." For many years, it was considered a myth that Governor Armijo was buried in the Socorro Church. Armijo's will and the church records cited above were found by William Keleher and published in his now famous book, "Turmoil in New Mexico." One of Socorro's most famous sons, is indeed buried under the floor at Socorro's San Miguel Church.

Governor Armijo returned to Socorro, at least initially, believing the sovereignty of the original Spanish Socorro Land Grant might protect him, after it became a U.S. Territory. It is curious to this writer that this historical fact was not used in 1953 to support the legal justification of Socorro's sovereign status for the Free State of Socorro.