

Interpretive Report:
Fort Union and the Economy of Northern New Mexico, 1860-1868
by
Richard Flint and Shirley Cushing Flint

From its beginning in 1851 and continuing for three quarters of its 40-year life, Fort Union was the hub of U.S. military activity in the Territory (and Military District) of New Mexico. Of most economic effect on its neighboring Hispanic communities, associated with Fort Union for half its career (20 years: 1851-53 and 1861-78) was the general supply depot for the entire district. In order to keep the district supplied with such items as hay, oats, and fodder, the quartermaster department at Union Depot purchased millions of dollars of stores (a significant portion from native New Mexican suppliers). In addition, distribution of stores to the far-flung posts of the district and construction of the depot itself from 1863-1868 necessitated the hiring of hundreds of civilian employees (almost exactly half of whom were New Mexico natives from relatively nearby settlements). Meanwhile, the garrisoned post of Fort Union itself throughout its existence purchased goods and services locally, on a smaller scale than the depot to be sure, but enough to serve as a source of cash to some in the local civilian economy.

Union Depot was a powerful agent in the continuing transformation of the traditional economy of subsistence agriculture and barter into a dominantly cash-dependent system, particularly in northern New Mexico. The depot's transformational role, though, was uneven. It's peak activity lasted from its return to Fort Union from Albuquerque early in the Civil War until completion of the building of the third Fort Union in 1868.

For those 17 years an unprecedented amount of cash flowed from Fort Union and Union Depot to Hispanics of northern New Mexico. The picture that emerges from this study is one of hundreds of Hispanic men seasonally drawing relatively low cash wages as laborers at the depot, probably to supplement their traditional economic activities, other hundreds with longer-term employment as teamsters, as well as a few Hispanic contractors for corn, fodder, and hay who periodically reaped handsome returns supplying their agricultural products to the army.

From minimal payrolls, averaging just over \$1,900 per month throughout

1860, the quartermasters' settlement records show a step upward with the return of the depot to Ft. Union in 1861, when surviving payrolls for the third quarter averaged \$10,500 a month. In the wake of the unsuccessful Confederate invasion of New Mexico in early 1862, payrolls at Ft. Union again moved higher. Construction of the third and final fort complex, including the very large depot facility, began in 1863, but its effects on civilian payroll are not evident until the summer of 1864. At that point the civilian payroll took a quantum jump upward, from which level it did not descend until mandatory work force reductions began late in 1868. From July 1864 through April 1868 combined surviving payrolls of Union Depot and Ft. Union average over \$29,100 per month. By 1865 the work force at Union Depot was a whopping 534. Hispanics comprised almost 60% of the civilian employees that month and received some \$7,930 in wages. The peak of civilian employment at Fort Union and Union Depot appears to have been in late 1865 and early 1866.

We have compiled an aggregate list of 1,053 civilians who were employed at Fort Union or Union Depot at one time or another between January 1860 and December 1868. Our concern here is with the 531 Hispanic-surnamed employees who make up 50.43% of the aggregate list. The distribution of those 531 by type of employment is as follows:

teamsters:	204
laborers:	108
contract freighters:	31
guides:	8
cooks:	6
retrieval of livestock:	6
court martial services:	5
expressmen:	4
herders:	4
wagon repair:	1
carpenter:	1
mason:	1
interpreter:	1
notary public:	1
contract supplier:	1
apprehension of deserter:	1
unspecified:	148

With the exception of the single mason and carpenter, the Hispanic-

surnamed employees were at the lowest salary levels among the Fort Union and Union Depot work force. Even among teamsters and laborers, Hispanos were for the most part confined to the lowest paid positions, earning at the rate of \$30 a month. Nevertheless, the several hundred Hispanic-surnamed individuals in the employ of the fort and depot, earned substantially more than they would likely have been able to in wage labor unconnected to the military.

Naturally, the work of laborers, involved primarily in construction, was more seasonally restricted than that of teamsters, a number of whom had continuous employment at the depot for many months and even years. Of the 531 Hispanos identified as employees of Fort Union and Union Depot during the nine years covered by this study, it has been possible to identify the likely county of origin of 95, through comparison of the aggregate employee roster and the 1860 census index. The great majority of Hispanic civilian employees (90.52%) came from the four northern New Mexico counties of San Miguel, Taos, Mora, and Santa Fe.

Hispanic civilian employees at the fort and depot constituted a substantial group that traveled significant distances from their hometowns to work, often for months at a time, to earn what by standards outside New Mexico were very modest wages. It seems likely that most laborers and many teamsters sought only to supplement their traditional livelihoods through work at Fort Union. Employment for the military for these individuals probably meant only seasonal migration to the fort by male members of households, while other members remained at home continuing traditional routines of farming and ranching. Thus, employment at Fort Union probably did not mark a significant departure from longstanding habits for many northern New Mexico families, though the level of cash pay thus obtained was likely considerably higher than in previous years.

It was the task of the quartermaster of the district depot at Fort Union during the period of this study to acquire thousands of tons of forage annually from local suppliers. As with employment expenditures, we see that a modest level of purchases held until reestablishment of the depot at Ft. Union,

averaging just \$8,477 per month in 1860 and 1861. From March 1862 through December 1863, however, reported purchases more than quadrupled. A similar purchase level (\$31,778/mo.) was again maintained during the seven-month stretch from September 1864 through March 1865. Late 1865 and early 1866 saw the same peak of activity in purchase of stores as did the civilian payroll data.

Throughout the entire study period and for nearly all suppliers, corn was the commodity furnished in largest volume to Fort Union. Corn was followed in volume by hay, fodder, oats, and barley, in that order. In excess of a million dollars was probably transferred from Fort Union to Hispanos of northern New Mexico during the nine years covered by this study in the process of sale and purchase of quartermaster stores.

Named in the surviving quartermasters' settlement records for 1860-1868 are 575 civilian suppliers of stores, of which 231 (40.17%) are Hispanic-surnamed. Pablo Antonio Sena of San José was the Hispanic supplier who received the highest total recompense during the period: \$18,235.05. Most Hispanic suppliers, however, seem to have sold their produce only infrequently to Union Depot and Fort Union.

As with civilian employees, the great majority (70.45%) of suppliers of stores hailed from the *Rio Arriba* counties. Still, a significant 29.55% came from the *Rio Abajo* counties. This may well reflect the concentration of Hispanic merchants/freighters in the Chihuahua trade in the Rio Abajo, some of whom, with the establishment of Fort Union, simply diverted some of their energy and stock from the southern market to the closer northern one. In contrast to the situation with regard to Hispanic laborers, it is quite likely that the demand of Fort Union and Union Depot for forage quickly established reliance of local Hispanic farmers on that market and led them to increase planting and production of corn, the crop most in demand. Particularly for growers in San Miguel and Mora Counties, this meant something of a bonanza while it lasted.

As a major employer of construction workers and laborers the tenure of

Fort Union was relatively brief, lasting just six building seasons, 1863-1868. And it appears that most Hispanic laborers were fully aware of the temporary nature of the employment opportunities available through the fort. In general, laborers used that employment to supplement their traditional livelihoods. For them wage labor at the fort usually did not involve long term change of residence or revolution in mode of living. Rather, for hundreds of Hispanos it resulted in short-lived influx of cash that allowed purchase of goods beyond their usual means or accelerated purchase of common big ticket items.

For teamsters and suppliers of quartermaster stores, on the other hand, the situation was more complex. Some teamsters and producer/merchants had already likely been involved in freighting and commerce, as comancheros and as parties in the Missouri-Santa Fe-Chihuahua trade. For such individuals the appearance of Fort Union and Union Depot as a nexus of supply and trade activity meant only a change of venue for their usual pursuits. For others, though, such as the farmers of northern New Mexico, the sudden establishment of a huge nearby market precipitated the refocusing of work energy and impelled a shift away from self-contained communities toward linkage with and increasing dependence on economic and social entities outside the local area.