

Death at the White House, Action in New Mexico **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

As if the fate of the nation was not enough for Abraham Lincoln to bear, on February 20, 1862 the president suffered a grave personal tragedy when his 11-year-old son William died. Affectionately known as Willie, the boy had contracted an illness earlier in the year and gotten sicker as the weeks progressed. The most likely cause was typhoid fever caused by the unsanitary drinking water pumped into the White House. Willie was a particular favorite of Lincoln's and he lamented "My poor boy. He was too good for this earth."

The mood was far different in the Confederate White House. On February 22, Jefferson Davis was inaugurated in Richmond. Reaching out to the Founding Fathers as inspiration for his inaugural speech, Davis proclaimed that "Civil War there cannot be between States held together by their volition only".

On the military fronts, this week saw minor actions in Texas, northern Virginia, Missouri and Arkansas. Union troops under Brigadier General Nathaniel Banks occupied Harpers Ferry at the junction of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers.

February 22 saw rare Civil War action in the far West. A few days earlier, Confederate forces under Brigadier General Henry Sibley had begun to advance up the Rio Grande. The march was part of a grand scheme concocted by Sibley and pitched successfully to Jefferson Davis. Sibley's ultimate goal was to secure the New Mexico Territory for the Confederacy and to then turn his attention to Colorado, Nevada and California. Both Colorado and California were rich in gold and other minerals that would be critical to overall Confederate success. In a

precursor of William Sherman's later March to the Sea, Sibley intended to take few supplies and to live off the trail and what was captured at Union forts along the way.

In mid-February Sibley's 3,000 men came upon Fort Craig along the Santa Fe Trail in southern New Mexico. The fort looked too strong to take head-on, so Sibley decided to go around it. Moving northward, he intended to cross the Rio Grande at Valverde Ford. Colonel Edward Canby, in command at Fort Craig, decided that something must be done to hinder Sibley's intentions and sent cavalry and artillery to meet the Confederates.

In what turned out to be a somewhat amateurish fight, the Battle of Valverde included some tragic-comic elements including the war's only charge of soldiers bearing lances and mules packed with explosives sent toward the enemy only to return to their owners and exploding. At the end of the day, the Confederates held the battlefield. Sibley would continue his grand march west to fight another day.

Also this week, as citizens and Confederate soldiers fled Nashville, Union soldiers entered and took the city without bloodshed. Grant's victory earlier in the month at Fort Donelson had opened the doors to Nashville and it would remain in Union hands for the rest of the war. The fall of Nashville was a deep blow for the Confederacy. The eighth largest city in the South, it contained a great deal of industry including factories for manufacturing artillery and for creating gunpowder. It was also an important railroad hub and port on the Cumberland River.