



Manual Alvarez, 1794-1856: A Southwestern Biography

Thomas E. Chavez

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Manuel Álvarez was born in Spain around 1794. In 1818 he left Spain, reaching Mexico in 1819.[1] In 1823 he left Mexico and travelled via Cuba to Missouri, then continued from St. Louis west to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he opened a store. The Mexican republic had gained independence from Spain during the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821). In 1829 the Mexican government expelled all Spanish nationals. For a few years Álvarez was a free trapper in the Rocky Mountain fur trade, then a brigade leader for the American Fur Company, returning to Santa Fe around 1834. On 21 March 1839 he was appointed United States consul at Santa Fe. He did not receive a formal "exequator" from the government of Mexico, but was informally permitted to act as consul by the governor. He reached Santa Fe in July of 1839, finding no seal, flag, coat of arms or other normal consular equipment when he arrived. The Texas Santa Fe Expedition of 1841, which the Mexicans saw as a military invasion, created a crisis in Santa Fe. The local American merchants were subject to popular and official attacks. When the expedition approached Santa Fe, Alvares asked Governor Manuel Armijo for permission to go out and talk with the leader, but was refused. Alvarez later was wounded and narrowly escaped death from an angry crowd. This crisis blew over, and Álvarez served as acting consul until the U.S. occupation in 1846. Álvarez's store became one of the largest in New Mexico. He was a resourceful individual, "an artful dodger and a pragmatist of the highest order", and became a wealthy and influential member of Santa Fe society both before and after the U.S. took control. He was critical of the Mexican government but a friend of the Mexicans, although he said of them, "They were too gullible, especially to the polished chicanery of American Merchants."

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