

10-1-1986

Charles Blumer: Pioneer, Civil Servant, and Merchant

Thomas Jaehn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Jaehn, Thomas. "Charles Blumer: Pioneer, Civil Servant, and Merchant." *New Mexico Historical Review* 61, 4 (1986). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol61/iss4/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Historical Review* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Charles Blumner: Pioneer, Civil Servant, and Merchant

THOMAS JAEHN

The opening of the Mexican period marked a transition era in New Mexico history. For the first time, the former citizens of monarchist Spain experimented with new freedoms afforded by a republican form of government and laissez-faire economics. The Santa Fe Trail, which opened in 1821, funneled frontier merchants and new ideas into this far northern frontier where both made a profound impact on the development of New Mexico. A lively trade resulted. Among the early arrivals were the Germans, recently arrived from Europe and anxious to share in the American dream which, for some, was to be found in northern Mexico. From letters that passed between Carl Blumner and his family in Germany, we know that he was one of those who sought after that dream.

Carl Bernhard Daniel Blumner was born in Briesen near Friesack, Germany, on March 17, 1805. Blumner was twenty-six years old in 1831 when he and his brother August left Germany "because unfortunately there common sense and freedom of speech [were] chained."¹ They emigrated to the United States and settled in Warrentown, Missouri, a frontier outpost where opportunities were great. Impatient to make his

Thomas Jaehn is a graduate student in the Department of History, University of New Mexico.

1. August Blumner to his relatives in Germany, n.d. (August's letter is a fragment, added to Charles's letter from April 3, 1838), folder 3, file 2, box 110, Hiltrud von Brandt Collection, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Charles Blumner, age 68. Courtesy of Museum of New Mexico.

fortune, however, Carl Blumner soon sold his farm in Warrentown to his brother and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico.² He arrived in 1836 with a small group of foreign merchants in time to witness the 1837 revolt in Santa Fe, which he described as:

Bloody! the people, angered by oppression and bad government, arose in masses and moved toward Santa Fe! The Governor went to meet them; he lost the battle; he fled with all the other notabilities from the city; he has been captured and killed in a horrible, bloody way! The Governor, Don Alvino [sic] Perez has been killed and his head separated from his body; Don Santiago Abrevio [sic], they cut his tongue out of his mouth; . . . and several others have been killed. They carried the mutilated corpses to the church cemetery where they had to pass my door.³

In a later letter, Charles gave more details on the activities of the foreign merchants during the uprising: "We, the foreigners here, have been prepared at that day for a hot battle; because we were notified by spies that the revolutionaries, after entering Santa Fe, will plunder all foreigners' stores and houses."⁴ Consequently, they organized and awaited the attack, armed with about "500 to 600" guns.⁵ In addition, they kept their horses saddled for flight if necessary. The revolution passed, however, without seriously affecting Blumner and his compatriots.

This rare 1837 account of the revolution, as well as Blumner's other early descriptions of social life in Santa Fe, are invaluable. They add to the accounts by Josiah Gregg and other chroniclers. Of Santa Fe Blumner wrote: "When I arrived here I was surprised to see all the members of the female sex smoking; but this also was a custom with the females as well as males."⁶ Blumner was also surprised at the passion of both rich and poor women for gambling at the faro tables. Charles included the fandango and cock and bull fights among his list of Mexican vices.

In his first five years in Santa Fe Blumner held a variety of jobs. Although he had several opportunities he quickly gravitated to the United States Consul in Santa Fe. That he chose to work with Manuel Álvarez, a man of political importance, indicates that Blumner was not only ambitious, but also careful in choosing business associates. It appears that he chose security in the form of a monthly (or more accurately, quarterly)

2. Deed records, Warrentown, Missouri, Book D, p. 261.

3. Charles Blumner to his mother, Johanna, and his sister, Hannchen, April 3, 1838, folder 3, Brandt Collection.

4. Charles Blumner to Hannchen, March 18, 1841, folder 3, Brandt Collection.

5. Obviously, Blumner did not intend to say that there were 500 to 600 foreigners. Rather, he intended to make the point that the small group of foreigners in Santa Fe was well armed, each individual having several single-shot guns.

6. Charles Blumner to Hannchen, March 18, 1841, folder 3, Brandt Collection.

salary, in contrast to Jewish-German immigrants, such as the Iffelds, Spiegelbergs, Staabs, Speyer, and others who went directly into risky private business.

By 1841 Blumner was well established in Santa Fe, and his relationship with Álvarez extended beyond routine business matters. In 1841, for instance, Blumner collected debts owed Álvarez, a fact that implies that he also served as Álvarez' accountant or bookkeeper.⁷ As responsibilities increased, he basically became a business manager for Álvarez. Blumner also witnessed documents drawn by Álvarez as United States Consul.⁸

Apart from his work for Consul Álvarez, Blumner held other positions. Writing to his sister Hannchen, Blumner reported that in his first five years on the New Mexican frontier, he had worked as a gold miner, clerk, business merchant, accountant, and for a while owned a wine shop; "I had luck and bad fortune as well! I have seen good and bad times! I have been rich and poor, poor and rich . . . I have accumulated as well as lost! Lost and again accumulated!"⁹

Blumner indicated that his economic situation depended on the circumstances and conditions of the time and often it was not his choice in which business he found himself. By the time he wrote the above letter to his sister, he was again in the mercantile business as manager of a local merchandise company. This position, like other similar positions he held, was mainly due to the fact that he was popular in Santa Fe. In addition, he spoke French, Spanish, and English, basic skills for success and survival on the Mexican frontier.

Sometime between 1841 and 1846, Blumner accumulated sufficient capital to launch his own business. He hoped to enjoy the lucrative profits of the Santa Fe trade. George Rutledge Gibson, second lieutenant with Colonel Stephen Kearny's 1846 expeditionary force mentioned Blumner in an account filled with precise observations on a land considered strange and alien. In Gibson's journal Blumner is one of those merchants "who made forced marches to Santa Fe ahead of Colonel Kearny in order to obtain *guias* [permits to sell merchandise in Mexico] at war prices."¹⁰

His business apparently continued to flourish, for in an 1852 letter he mentions that he gave his brother "\$1200 to \$1300" in 1849 so that August could continue his trip to the California goldfields. He also stated,

7. Business Papers 1841, nos. 469, 882, Manuel Álvarez Collection, State Record and Archives Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

8. Álvarez Collection, number 518.

9. Charles Blumner to Hannchen, March 18, 1841, folder 3, Brandt Collection.

10. George Rutledge Gibson, *Journal of a Soldier under Kearny and Doniphan 1846-1847*, ed. Ralph Bieber (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1935), 41.

however, that in the years since his arrival in Santa Fe he had lost about seven thousand to eight thousand *Thaler*.¹¹

Blumner's mercantile business prospered, and he also managed to acquire a political office that provided an additional small but secure income. His case was similar to other merchants who held public office, apparently without any sense of conflict of interest. Blumner, like others of that era, furthered his private business interests through his political positions.

For example, when business was bad, he could count on income from his public office. At various times he was treasurer, collector, United States marshal, or county sheriff, and sometimes he held two positions simultaneously. A typical example is his last known attempt to establish a mercantile business:

About 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ years ago I started a merchandise business here in Santa Fe and kept it for 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ years. The times, prices, and all the other mercantile opportunities have changed for the worse that I sold the rest of my business . . . Now I have no specific occupation, except for my post as Treasurer of New Mexico; and I am willing to wait until the circumstances are going to be better in order to join again the merchants' business.¹²

It seems that Blumner was unwilling to risk everything at once. Although he wanted to make his fortune, he preferred to maintain a political position that provided financial security in times of economic decline.

Blumner's associates prior to 1846 certainly paid off in political dividends when the United States Army of the West under Kearny arrived in Santa Fe in August 1846. Among those appointed to high political offices by Kearny was Charles, now Carlos, Blumner. Lieutenant J. W. Abert reported that ". . . while we were at Tuerto the following notice was received, which, as it gives a view of the civil officers appointed for the territory, may be of interest: . . . Carlos Blumner sera Tesorero. . ."¹³ Apparently he fulfilled the obligations of this office reasonably well. Describing events of the period, historian John Caughey has concluded that "political appointments were the rule, and yet the selected acquitted themselves well."¹⁴ This appointment is the first of several political positions held by Blumner.

11. Charles Blumner to Johanna, October 31, 1852, folder 3, Brandt Collection. A Prussian *Thaler* was about \$80 in U.S. currency.

12. Charles Blumner to Johanna, August 1, 1860, folder 3, Brandt Collection.

13. *Report of Lieut. J. W. Abert, of his examination of New Mexico in the years 1846-47* (Albuquerque: Horn and Wallace, 1962), 52-53. See also "Kearny, Santa Fe, proclamation of appointments for the Government of New Mexico, Territory of the United States, September 22, 1846," reel 98, frame 4, *Territorial Archives of New Mexico* (TANM).

14. John Walton Caughey, "Early Federal Relations with New Mexico" (master's thesis, University of California, 1926), 55.

He continued as treasurer to at least February 27, 1850, when he signed a letter to the President of the United States as "Treasurer." In that letter, he and other signatories complained about insufficient protection against Indians and begged for more "adequate Mounted forces."¹⁵ Blumner also complained about his salary. A report of the secretary of war, dated May 5, 1852, was devoted to the matter of civil expenses and debts. Among those items listed was the fact that Blumner's salary had not been paid from September 22, 1846 to March 31, 1850.¹⁶

Nevertheless, it seems that Blumner proved to be a reliable civil servant. On December 28, 1850 Governor James Calhoun reported that the census had been taken by Charles Blumner, whom he described as "capable and honest, and if the census taken by him is incorrect, it is because the Indians have concealed the truth."¹⁷

The appointment as treasurer under American military rule was reaffirmed on July 16, 1851, when Blumner took the oath of office as territorial treasurer. Manuel Álvarez and Ceran St. Vrain, who participated in the Santa Fe trade as early as 1825 and was active in Taos politics, posted a security bond of twenty thousand dollars.¹⁸ This act evidenced their confidence in the abilities of Blumner to properly fulfill his obligations of office, and also revealed their political connections with him. Blumner held this office until 1853 when he was appointed to the prestigious post of United States marshal.

Larry Ball, in his study of United States marshals in Arizona and New Mexico, assessed the appointment as follows: "Having gained the respect of part of the Mexican population before the American conquest of New Mexico, the merchant-colonist furnished the political and social leadership of the territory until the 1870's."¹⁹ Blumner served as United States marshal from 1853 to 1857 and, according to the salary schedule established by Congress, he earned two hundred dollars per year "and fees."²⁰ On January 28, 1851, for example, the treasury records show "fees for Charles Blumner for services in Circuit Court of Santa Fe, County, August term \$15."²¹ Blumner also claimed expenses. On August 19, 1851 he collected sixty dollars for a trip "to Albuquerque, Rio Abajo, to

15. Annie H. Abel, ed., *The Official Correspondence of James Calhoun* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1915), 280-81.

16. Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of Arizona and New Mexico* (Albuquerque: Horn and Wallace, 1962), 445.

17. Abel, ed., *Official Correspondence*, 158.

18. Howard Roberts Lamar, *The Far Southwest 1846-1912: A Territorial History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 44-45; "Public Officials 1851-1911," reel 35, frame 4, *TANM*.

19. Larry D. Ball, *The United States Marshals of New Mexico and Arizona Territories, 1846-1912* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), 14.

20. Bancroft, *History*, 629.

21. Records of the Treasurer, 1849-1909, reel 46, frame 46, *TANM*.

bring 5000 Dollars for the legislative assembly, in silver."²² The total fees he was paid "on warrant" amounted to at least three hundred dollars during his period as United States marshal.

When Blumner resigned his marshalcy in 1857, his colleagues honored him with a party and a silver pipe for his contributions to federal law enforcement.²³ Blumner's political career and financial fortune progressed harmoniously. By January 17, 1858, Blumner had a net worth adequate to allow him to post a ten-thousand-dollar bond for his friend and business associate Álvarez, appointed Commissioner of Public Buildings.²⁴

Also by 1858, he sold a house to newly arrived Territorial Judge Kirby Benedict. According to the deed records of Santa Fe, "on December 6, 1858, the judge and his wife purchased a ten room house and a large lot from Charles Blumner."²⁵ Interestingly, he was once again mentioned as treasurer of the territory, a position he held until 1863, after the 1860 Legislative Council renewed his appointment for two more years. For both appointments, merchants Levi Spiegelberg and John Mecure posted bond of twenty thousand dollars.²⁶ He also was the first United States collector of internal revenue during the period 1864–1868.²⁷ This office was Blumner's last known public position. He had saved enough, whether earned as civil servant or as merchant, to retire.

Blumner's career is important to the history of New Mexico for several reasons. His letters, including those by his brother August, are a unique primary source on events during an important period in northern New Mexico. Blumner described life in Santa Fe, discussed the mercantile business, and was an eyewitness to the 1837 revolt. His importance to New Mexico is also reflected in the fact that a town is named after him (Blumner is located near Vallecitos, twenty miles east of Cebolla in Rio Arriba County).²⁸ For Blumner was a transitional figure who lived in Santa Fe during both the Mexican and the American territorial periods. Unlike most foreigners who came with the American troops, Blumner was a forerunner of the German immigrant merchants who flocked to New Mexico in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Blumner fits the pattern of many foreign immigrants to the United States and New Mexico. Like them, he came to the United States to

22. Reel 46, frame 63, *TANM*.

23. Lansing B. Bloom, "Historical Society Minutes, 1859–1863," *New Mexico Historical Review*, 18 (October 1943), 394–428.

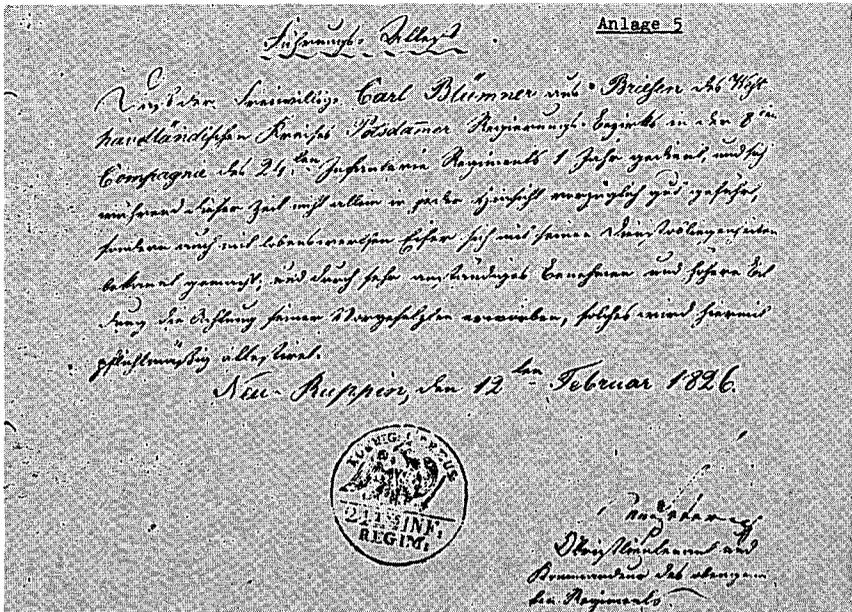
24. Records of the Treasurer, 1849–1909, reel 35, frame 9, *TANM*.

25. Aurora Hunt, *Kirby Benedict: Frontier Federal Judge* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1961), 73.

26. Records of the Treasurer, 1849–1909, reel 35, frames 26 and 30, *TANM*.

27. [Santa Fe] *Daily New Mexican*, June 6, 1876.

28. The town was short lived; it had a post office from 1905 until 1907. T. M. Pearce, ed., *New Mexico Place Names* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1965), 19.



Copy of *Führungszeugnis* (certificate of conduct) of the Royal Prussian 24th Infantry Regiment attests Blumner responsibility, outstanding behavior, and ambition. Courtesy Hiltrud von Brandt, Ickig, Federal Republic of Germany.

make his fortune and, like others, moved on from Missouri to New Mexico. By joining the Santa Fe trade, he hoped to better his economic situation. Like other frontier businessmen, Blumner came to realize that *"nicht alles ist Gold was glänzt"* (not everything that glitters is gold) as he suffered several setbacks and more than once dreamed of going back to Germany. He did not become as wealthy as did the Spiegelbergs and the Ilfelds (two prominent mercantile families) because he was too involved in politics. Unlike other German merchants, Blumner coveted an official position to which he could retreat from his mercantile business when economic times were bad.

Blumner, like most of the German merchants in New Mexico, adapted well to the region's unique culture. This is best reflected in the change of his name. He began as Carl Blümner, changed the spelling to Carl Blumner, then Charles Blumner, and finally was known as Carlos Blumner. Due to his willingness and ability to adapt to an unfamiliar environment, he developed a strong personal, financial, and political reputation. For Blumner, New Mexico offered a better and freer life than he could have expected in Germany. Although "life here [on the frontier] is inconsistent and due to changes" he seemed to be happy in his marriage with Felician Quintana y Alarid of Santa Fe (married in 1848, they had

a son, Carl Alexander, born in 1851), and the family was blessed with good health.²⁹ Unlike other immigrants seeking their fortunes but never finding them, Blumner was "satisfied not to have gained nor lost any money,"³⁰ although his son Carl Alexander, according to a letter to a German relative in Berlin, complained of his poor economic situation.³¹ Charles Blumner died on June 5, 1876 at the age of seventy-one and was buried in the Masonic cemetery in Santa Fe (he had been a member of the Masonic fraternity for fifteen years).³²

He left behind an impressive legacy as territorial treasurer from 1846 to 1854 and again from 1857 to 1863. His good service provided continuity, stability, and a sound financial footing for the territory during a period of transition. Blumner is representative of the contribution to New Mexico development made by the numerous German and Jewish-German immigrants and merchants who came to the frontier territory. They made an enormous contribution to the "commercial revolution" that helped shape New Mexico Territory.³³

29. Carl Alexander Blumner to his cousin, Hugo Blumner, October 30, 1904, folder 4, Brandt Collection.

30. Charles Blumner to Johanna, August 1, 1860, folder 3, Brandt Collection.

31. Carl Alexander Blumner to Hugo Blumner, June 12, 1905, folder 4, Brandt Collection.

32. Carl Alexander Blumner to Hugo Blumner, October 30, 1904, folder 4, Brandt Collection.

33. William J. Parish, "The German Jew and the Commercial Revolution in Territorial New Mexico, 1850–1900," *New Mexico Historical Review*, 35 (January 1960), 1–29; and *ibid.* (April 1960), 129–50.

Signed, numbered prints & art posters,
of Eric von Schmidt's masterly
portrayals of America's Past.

The Storming of the **ALAMO**

This epic painting of the fateful moment
in Texas history, displayed at San Antonio's
Witte Museum, is now available in a signed
& numbered edition. Art posters of details,
signed & otherwise, can also be ordered.

HERE FELL **CUSTER**

The definitive version of the Battle of the
Little Big Horn is also offered for the first
time. Both paintings originally graced the
pages of Smithsonian Magazine.



Minglewood Press proudly presents a series
of art posters celebrating renowned artist-
illustrator Harold von Schmidt's splendid &
enduring images of the Old West.



For further information, send for free color
brochure to Minglewood Press, PO Box 368
Westport, CT, 06880. Or call (203) 454-3758