

Civil War Battle of Mesilla & Major Lynde's Retreat

July 24-27, 1861



Lt. Col. John R. Baylor, 2nd Texas Mounted Rifles commander & governor of the Confederate Territory of Arizona

On July 24, 1861, Lt. Col. John Robert Baylor led 300 men consisting of two companies of the Second Texas Mounted Rifles, a Texas light-artillery company without its howitzers, an El Paso County scout company, and some civilians from Fort Bliss to Fort Fillmore, New Mexico Territory.

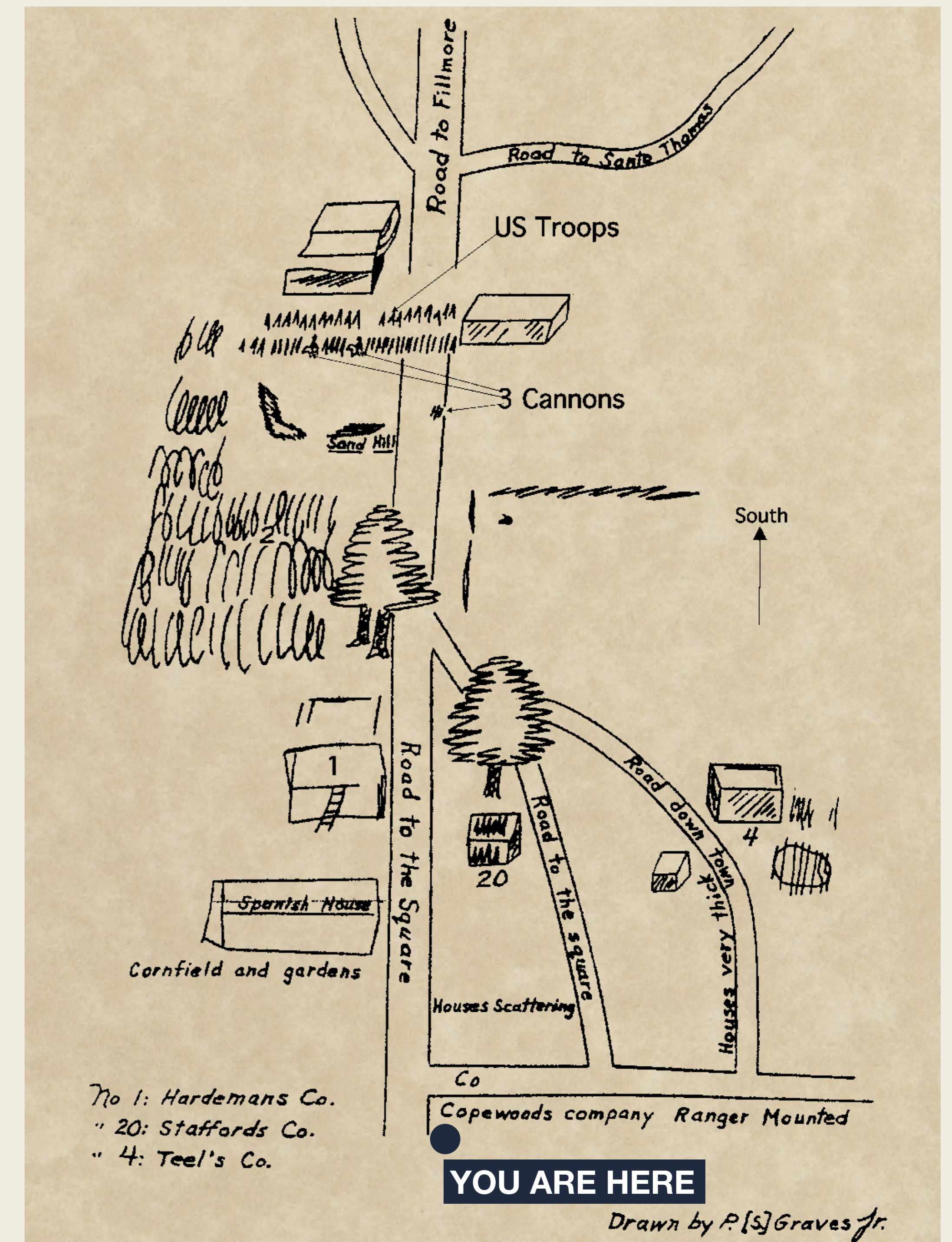
The Texans reached the vicinity of Fort Fillmore at night and placed themselves

between the fort and its water supply at the river. Baylor cancelled a planned attack after learning that one of his men had warned the garrison. His Texans forded the Rio Grande and early that afternoon entered nearby Mesilla, a strongly pro-Confederate community. With 380 infantry and mounted riflemen, plus howitzers, Union Major Isaac Lynde approached Mesilla from the south on July 25 (see map). Baylor rejected his demand for surrender. Lynde ordered his artillery to open fire. After a bungled charge, Lynde ordered a return to the fort. The Confederates remained in Mesilla, fearing a trap. Baylor sent to El Paso for artillery and additional men. When Lynde found out that Baylor had sent for artillery, he ordered Fort Fillmore abandoned that night.

Because Baylor blocked the shortest retreat route, north up the Rio Grande toward Fort Craig, Lynde and his troops headed northeast toward San Augustin Pass in the Organ Mountains with the objective to reach Fort Stanton, 150 miles away.

At sunrise on July 27, Baylor discovered Lynde's withdrawal. Baylor's troops and some "Arizona" civilians gave chase. By the time Baylor's speediest horsemen caught up with the stragglers, the roadside was littered with discarded equipment and prostrate regulars begging for water. Lynde and his mounted troops reached San Augustin Springs, and attempted to send water back to the lagging infantry. Baylor with part of his command, crossed the mountains by another pass and early in the afternoon of July 27, rode unopposed into Lynde's temporary camp. After a short discussion, Lynde surrendered his 492-man force. The victory at Mesilla was one of the war's early and surprising Confederate successes.

On August 1, Baylor proclaimed the Arizona Territory, Confederate States of America, and named himself governor. Mesilla remained the capital of the Confederate Arizona Territory until the Texan military forces withdrew back to Texas in July 1862. Baylor's dashing actions of the summer of 1861 added to his fame as a folk hero.



Sgt. Payton Graves, Jr. untitled sketch of the skirmish at Mesilla, New Mexico Territory, July 25, 1861