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An Analysis of Images in Mexican-American War Literature

Matthew Rudy[1]*

Abstract
Political and social tensions between Mexico and the United States over land divisions created racial prejudices during the nineteenth century. The Mexican-American War following the annexation of Texas provided fuel for new animosities in depictions of Mexicans in images and narrative literature within U.S. culture. John Frost's *The Mexican War and its Warriors* (1848) and other contemporary representations portrayed Mexicans as weak and untrustworthy cowards. My research uses theories of post-colonialism and Orientalism to argue that John Frost's pictorial images and narratives of Mexicans were used as historical justifications for the intervention into Mexico.

Keywords
John Frost — Texas — Mexico — Mexican-American War

[1] *Department of Art Education and Art History, University of North Texas*
***Faculty Mentor**: Dr. Kelly Donahue-Wallace

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Introduction

Political and social tensions between Mexico and the United States over land divisions created racial prejudices during the nineteenth century. The Mexican-American War following the annexation of Texas provided fuel for new animosities in depictions of Mexicans in images and narrative literature within U.S. culture. John Frost's *The Mexican War and its Warriors* (1848) and other contemporary representations portrayed Mexicans as weak and untrustworthy cowards [1]. My research uses theories of post-colonialism and Orientalism [2] to argue that John Frost's pictorial images and narratives of Mexicans were used as historical justifications for the intervention into Mexico. In order to accomplish this goal, the paper asks the following questions: In what way does Frost's book and its illustrations reflect the social and political context of the United States and its relationship with Mexico at the time? How do the images represent American attitudes and prejudices toward Mexico? How did the American view of itself justify its actions against Mexico? How do Frost's images relate to other depictions of Mexicans in this era?

The following paragraphs employ an art historical object-based research method to analyze the images in John Frost's *The Mexican War and Its Warriors* (1848). My analysis uses the theoretical framework of post-colonial theory as practiced by Edward Said. Said's theory of Orientalism analyzes the systematic approach through which the West defined the peoples of the East. Said investigates the discourse surrounding knowledge of the East, revealing the resulting unequal power relationship. He concluded that in defining the East in its own image, the West justified itself and its dominance. Orientalism provides a means through which to see certain attitudes and beliefs that Americans held towards Mexicans. Using the critical lens of postcolonial theory, my research method consists of analyzing and comparing images, reviewing relevant secondary literature, and considering the author's biography. Understanding these various sources within their social and political context provides a framework for examining American oppression and racial stereotypes.

The scholarly literature that has helped me to perform this analysis includes research on war narratives by Catherine Brosman, which considers historical accounts of the war [3]. Brosman's research elucidates the motives and goals of war writers, whether for social or political motives. The work by Brosman has helped me to understand why John Frost's *The Mexican War and Its Warriors* (1848) illustrates certain scenes, highlighting heroism and the grandeur of battle, and creating a biased view of the war. Likewise, the present research would have been also been greatly diminished if not for the work of Mark Bernhardt, which has been crucial in helping me to perform the analysis of Mexican imagery. Bernhardt's scholarship investigates how publishers lumped together stereotypes of Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans in depicting the Mexican in newspapers during the Mexican-American War [4]. Bernhardt also provides differing interpretations of why and how the images were created and perceived. Analy-

sis of Mexican imagery by Bernhardt has been helpful when coming to conclusions about the illustrations in John Frost's *The Mexican War and Its Warriors* (1848).

1. John Frost—*The Mexican War and its Warriors*

John Frost published *The Mexican War and its Warriors* in New Haven and Philadelphia in 1848. The book, which claims to do justice to both sides of the conflict, describes the events of the Mexican-American War, illustrating these in forty-five wood engravings by Charles Desilver. The engravings included images of battles, portraits, landscapes, and scenes of life during the Mexican-American War. Frost was a Professor of Belles Lettres at the High School of Philadelphia. Prior to this war history, Frost wrote school textbooks on history and English. Frost's other works include The Pictorial History of the World, The American Naval Biography, Pictorial History of the United States, and Wonders of History.

Frost's *The Mexican War and Its Warriors* (1848) was produced during the era in which most Americans believed that the United States had not only a duty but a God-given right to expand their nation through manifest destiny. U.S. expansion into the West was aided by the Monroe Doctrine, which forbade European powers from interfering in the affairs of the Western hemisphere [5]. This gave the American government unchallenged access to much of the continent, except the land held by Mexico. The declining relationship between the United States and Mexico over the possible annexation of Texas was a real concern to the Mexican government. In response, the Mexican government held official protests calling into question the legality of the United States' offer to annex Texas [6]. Despite the protests throughout Mexico, the offer of annexation would be accepted by Texans on July 4, 1845. In January 1846, after a year of attempted negotiations, President Polk sent General Zachary Taylor to the Rio Grande. General Taylor would fight for three years, winning four battles during the Mexican-American War, before returning to the United States. In 1848, Mexico surrendered to the United States with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty recognized the Texas southern border as the Rio Grande and added the territories of California, Arizona, Oklahoma, Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico.

The annexation of Texas had significant social implications for the way Americans viewed Mexico. Newspaper publishers weighed in on the war expressing their political views not just through the written word, but also through imagery. Publishers, like Moses Yale Beach and James Gordon Bennett Sr. applied stereotypes developed for Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans to Mexicans; their goal was to depict the Mexicans as an inferior population. For example, the prevailing image of Native Americans during the time was as "heathen savages who brutally slaughtered white men and kidnapped white women and children" [4]. Beach applied this image to Mexicans in his newspaper images to imply that the Mexican is dangerous, and though he may lose most of the battles fought against the U.S., he should still be perceived as an imminent threat to American lives.

Racial prejudices, however, were not just products of the Mexican-American War. Views of Mexicans as the "Other" had been around as early as the 1820s. American travelers who journeyed into territories largely populated by Mexicans had little good to say about the culture. Mexicans were reported as being envious, addicted to gambling, and possessing rather loose morals [7]. Texan views a decade before the war emphasized that Mexicans were unfit to hold land and were so cowardly they would abandon their property at the first sight of an Anglo-American with a pistol. It was this type of imagery, engrained in the minds of the American reader, which Frost would employ in his illustrations of Mexico's territories and Mexican soldiers and citizens.

2. Frost's Use of Illustrations

Turning to the images, my research reveals that a group of illustrations in landscapes presents Mexico as barren, underpopulated, and underdeveloped, making it perfect for American expansionism. Frost's image "American Army Entering Marin" (Figure 1) is one of six representations of the Mexican landscape. The wood engraving depicts an American army marching toward the city of Marin (located in the background). Much of the landscape is uninhabited by people or animals and with only small trees and shrubs taking root. The image also reveals a Catholic church in the small town, referencing the United States' long history of anti-Catholic sentiments since its post-colonial era.

As Bernhardt notes in his analysis of contemporary images in the *New York Herald*, Frost's image serves to entice Americans to emigrate and cast Mexicans as unfit stewards of their land [4]. Frost only briefly mentions Marin in the text, but what he does mention is that the pioneers of the army focused on the route to Marin for the purpose of repairing the roads and making it practicable for artillery and wagons—for armies or settlers [1]. Other landscape images in Frost's book, such as "View of the Bishop's Palace" (Figure 2) and "Jalapa" (Figure 5), present the viewer with illustrations of vast landscapes engulfed by exotic flora and a serene mountain range towering over the small town. The illustrations similarly advertise a need for exploration and development for American migration into Mexico.

Whereas landscapes and vistas like these make up a small group of Frost's illustration, images of battles predominate and cast Mexicans as a threat to American lives. "The Battle of Buena Vista" (Figure 3) is the best example. It depicts menacing Mexican soldiers on horseback riding in to decimate American foot soldiers with rifles. The tone of this image is paralleled in Frost's text quoting a speech by General Zachary Taylor about the glory that awaits the troops and their independence from Mexico. The speech, like the image, casts the Americans as the transgressed and the Mexican as the transgressor. This visual presentation of Americans being outnumbered and outgunned may be likened to Brosman's

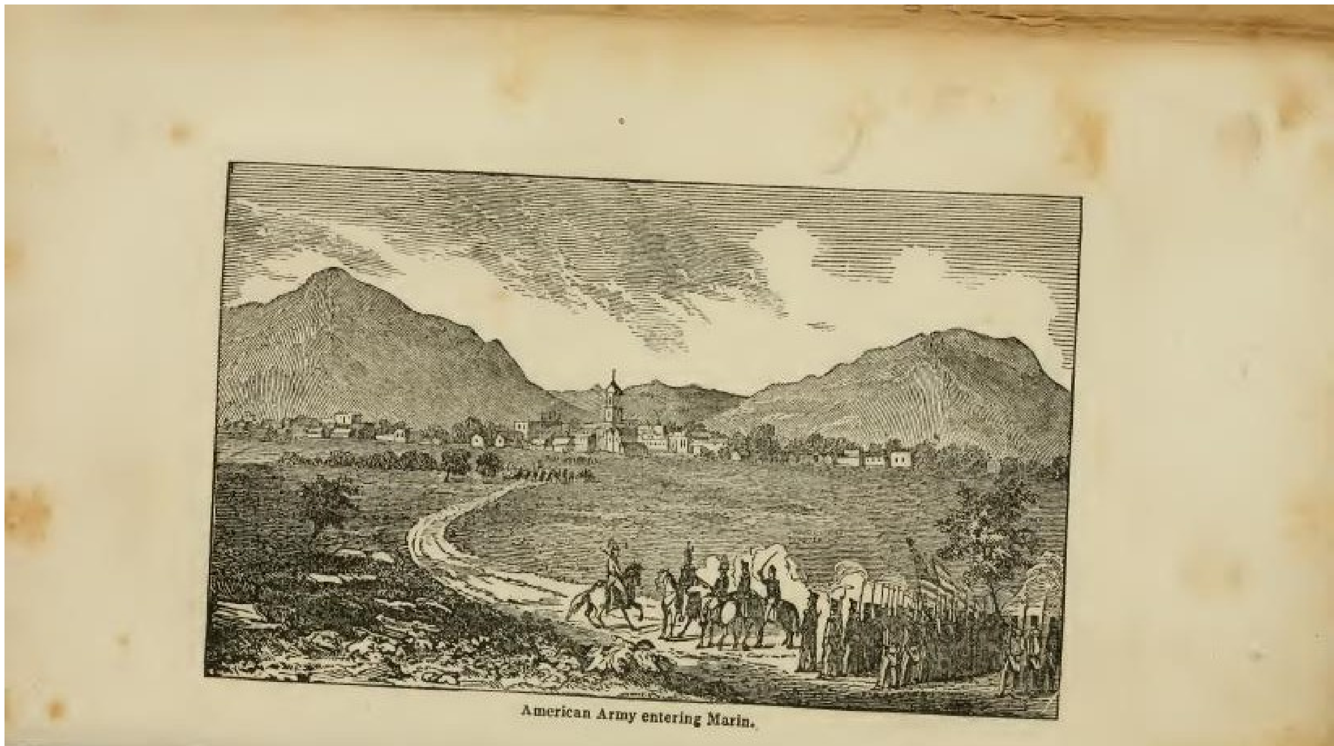

Figure 1. Charles DeSilver, "American Army Entering Marin," 1848, Wood Engraving.

finding that war narratives served a purpose in setting the standards of military conduct and inspiring a warlike spirit among their readers [3]. Newspaper illustrations also bolstered the fighting spirit, portraying Mexicans in a way to suggest they were a formidable nemesis requiring defeat, with skilled soldiers capable of putting up resistance against Americans [4]. The images of battles thus heighten the narrative in Frost's book to create a mythology of American virtue and Mexican brutality.

Yet even if they were at times outgunned, the American soldiers appear in other illustrations of battles such as "Battle of Palo Alto" (Figure 6), "Cavalry Charge" (Figure 4), and, "Storming of the Bishop's Palace" (Figure 11) as superior in other ways to Mexican soldiers. In particularly, Frost's illustrations employ several visual strategies to communicate American superiority, including portraying their flank of troops as well organized and structured compared to the wildness and lack of discipline of the Mexican cavalry. Many of the images also show the American flag being held proudly taken into the chaos of battle, signifying a patriotic respect for their country and its goal of expansion.

Portraiture also fans the nationalist flames in Frost's book with eleven images, ten of which depict American officers. Only one of the images is of a Mexican general, suggesting a lack of respect for Mexican leaders. Comparing the portrait of the Mexican General Paredes (Figure 7) to any of the ten American portraits reveals the artist's bias. All of the American portraits include a draped American flag over a canon and an elaborate baroque like frame surrounding the sitter. The portrait General Paredes lacks all the traits of the American portraits and only presents the General in his uniform. As Brosman states, prestige is often associated with uniforms as well as other insignia of rank and accomplishment so, it would seem that the artist's motive was to strip General Paredes of his rank [3]. Frost's text again parallels the spirit of the illustration, stating that Parades eventually lost his status among his countrymen who began looking for a new leader. Portraiture was thus, a way of promoting certain individuals as trustworthy, honorable, and deserving of respect among the public.

Entering more deeply into the images in Frost's text, it is clear that even the poses used to depict images of daily life in Mexico communicated bias. The wood engraving "Commencement of the Guerilla Warfare" (Figure 9) shows a group of Mexican *rancheros* drawn together, with their arms raised high ready for the ensuing battle against the Yankee. This threatening pose is paralleled in Frost's textual description of the butcheries perpetrated by the guerillas, which he calls appalling and that their cardinal principle was a war without pity. The depiction of Mexicans as dangerous and brutal savages, who were ready to wage war, would have presented a real concern for Americans settled in Mexico and their way of life.

Rather than savagery, other Mexican poses in Frost's text reveal sloth. For example, "Mother, Child, and Two Soldiers" (Figure 8) displays a mother with her child standing in a door way as two Mexican soldiers lounge on benches, drinking. The soldiers are relaxed with their swords cast on the ground

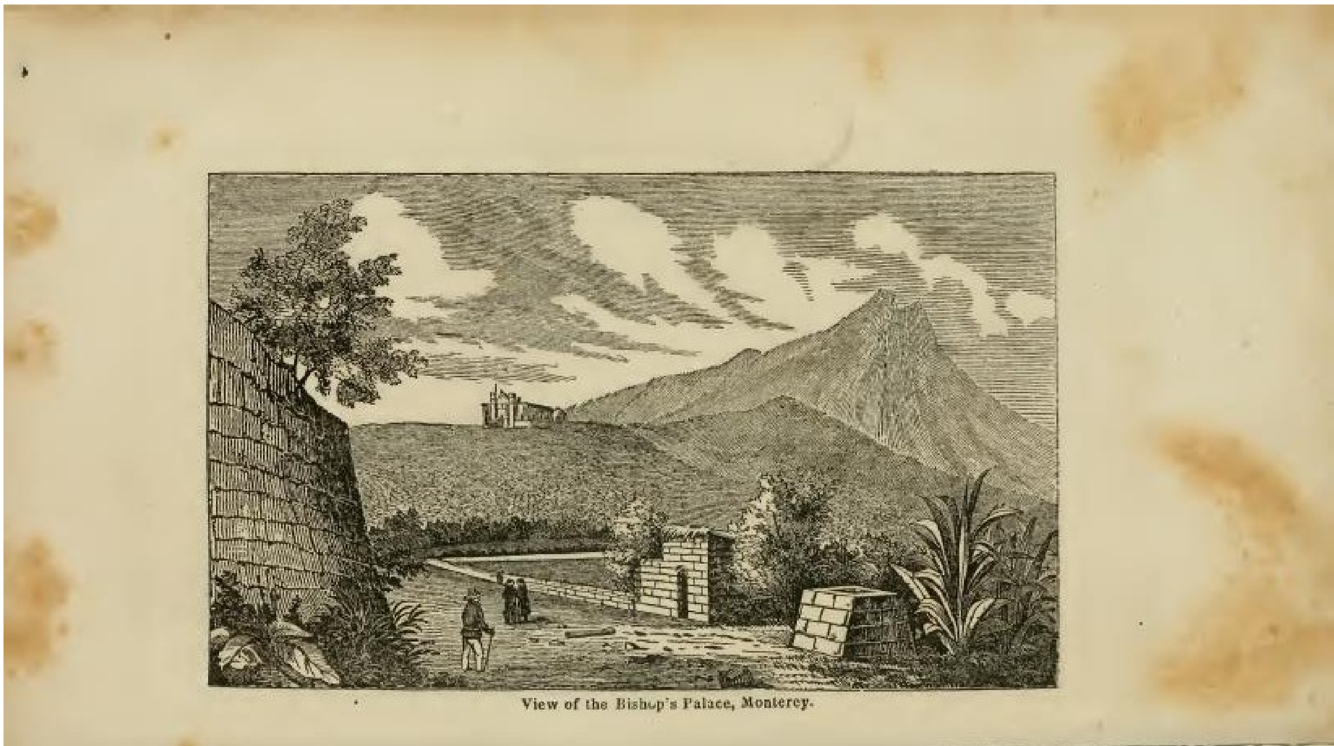

Figure 2. Charles DeSilver, "View of the Bishop's Palace," 1848, Wood Engraving.

as they slouch forward towards the woman. Similarly, "Soldier and Women with a Fruit Basket" (Figure 10) shows a soldier leaning against a wall chatting with a young woman. As no American soldiers are shown similarly, it stands to reason that the artist's intent was to show how Mexicans were undisciplined and lazy because instead of being on duty they are taking their time talking with women.

Classifying and analyzing the images in Frost's The Mexican War and Its Warriors reveals a negative bias towards Mexicans despite the author's so-called attempt to do justice for all. Frost's book more closely aligns with American feelings and sentiments about Mexicans as a whole during the Mexican-American War. These sentiments in many cases dehumanized the Mexican in order to justify American aggression over an enemy manufactured through print media. In one instance, Frost describes how as Lieutenant Porter and his troops retired a band of Mexicans yelling like Indians rushed upon them and plunged their knives into the breasts of the American troops. Frost's comparison of Mexicans to Indians is, as Bernhardt describes, a way to transpose stereotypes of Indians on to Mexicans to imply that Mexicans had retained the worst qualities of the three other races: Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans [4].

3. Conclusion

In portraying Mexican weakness and degradation, Frost's narrative of the Mexican-American War closely follows sentiments of manifest destiny. *The Mexican War and Its Warriors* and its illustrations do more to justify the United States intervention and mislead the American reader and viewer than to present an accurate account of the war, as he claimed. The fact that John Frost was a Professor of Belles Lettres teaching fiction, drama, and poetry at the High School of Philadelphia suggests that many accounts in his book would have been dramatized to promote an ideology favoring American expansion. Frost's position as a professor also meant that his book would have been taught in the High School of Philadelphia and possibly other schools. This would have convinced an entire generation of students after the war that the United States had every right to secure Texas from Mexico, referencing Mexican weakness, brutality, and trickery as justifications much like the rhetoric in John O'Sullivan's article Annexation, which blamed Mexico's expressed invitation with guarantees of state independence for their loss of Texas [8].

For his illustrations, Frost drew upon many of the images portraying Mexicans that had been circulating for quite a while. Newspaper publications like the *New York Herald* and the *New York Sun* had been producing much of the same imagery presented in *Mexican War and Its Warriors* (1848) two years before Frost published his book. It might not be possible to ever know whether the images in Frost's book were inspired by images in print media, but the striking comparisons of composition and content makes it likely that the artist, Charles DeSilver, might have used circulating images as a reference for his own work. Also, by using imagery that had already been in circulation in supposedly trustworthy newspapers, Frost would have strengthened his claim that his narrative of the war was a true historical account.

Figure 3. Charles Desilver, "Battle of Buena Vista," 1848, Wood Engraving.

John Frost's use of pictorial images and narratives in his book *Mexican War and Its Warriors* (1848) provides a glimpse into how writers and artists depicted the Mexican in order to justify the United States' invasion into Mexico in order to annex Texas. My data analysis of comparing the images used by Frost and outside sources, such as newspapers, helps ground my argument that real prejudices existed in the social context of the war and that these prejudices have a significant political and social impact on the relations between the United States and Mexico during that time.

Author Biography

Matthew Rudy graduated from the University of North Texas in 2016 with a Bachelor's Degree in Art History and a minor in Italian. He presented his paper Analysis of Images in Mexican – American War Literature at the Spring 2016 Scholar's Day. In 2016 he worked as an intern for both the North Texas Fashion Collection, as a registrar, and at the UNT Art Gallery doing curatorial research. He is currently working toward pursuing a graduate degree in museum studies.

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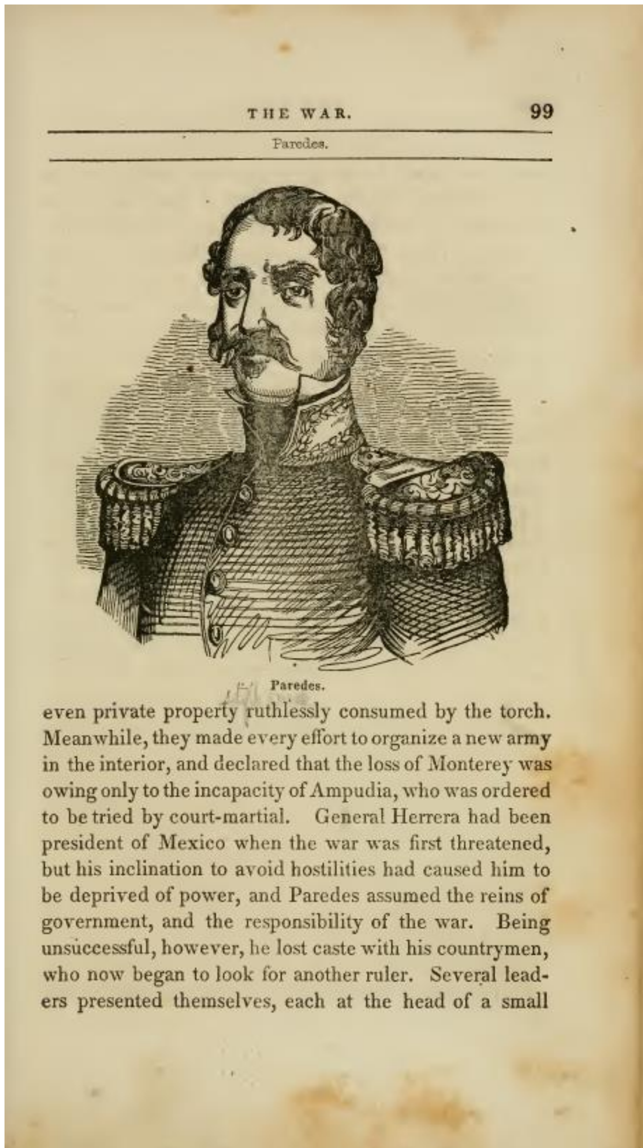
Figure 4. Charles Desilver, "Cavalry Charge," 1848, Wood Engraving.

Figure 5. Charles DeSilver, "Jalapa," 1848, Wood Engraving.

Figure 6. Charles DeSilver, “Battle of Palo Alto,” 1848, Wood Engraving.



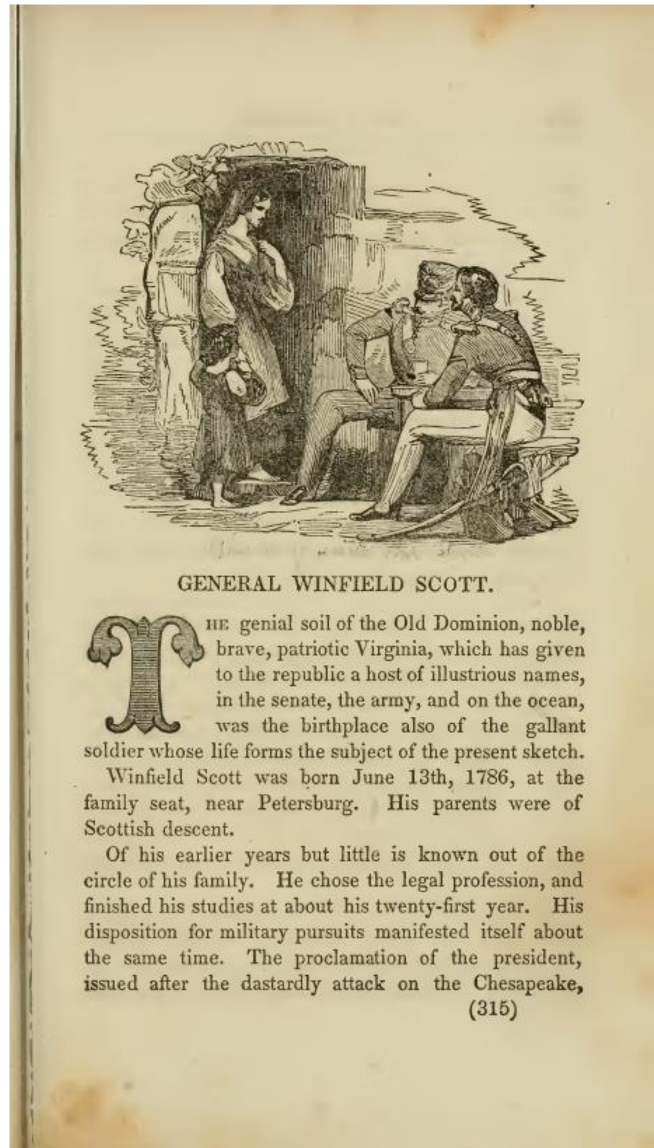
THE WAR. 99

Paredes.

Paredes.

even private property ruthlessly consumed by the torch. Meanwhile, they made every effort to organize a new army in the interior, and declared that the loss of Monterey was owing only to the incapacity of Ampudia, who was ordered to be tried by court-martial. General Herrera had been president of Mexico when the war was first threatened, but his inclination to avoid hostilities had caused him to be deprived of power, and Paredes assumed the reins of government, and the responsibility of the war. Being unsuccessful, however, he lost caste with his countrymen, who now began to look for another ruler. Several leaders presented themselves, each at the head of a small

Figure 7. Charles DeSilver, "General Paredes," 1848, Wood Engraving.



GENERAL WINFIELD SCOTT.

THE genial soil of the Old Dominion, noble, brave, patriotic Virginia, which has given to the republic a host of illustrious names, in the senate, the army, and on the ocean, was the birthplace also of the gallant soldier whose life forms the subject of the present sketch.

Winfield Scott was born June 13th, 1786, at the family seat, near Petersburg. His parents were of Scottish descent.

Of his earlier years but little is known out of the circle of his family. He chose the legal profession, and finished his studies at about his twenty-first year. His disposition for military pursuits manifested itself about the same time. The proclamation of the president, issued after the dastardly attack on the Chesapeake,

(315)

Figure 8. Charles DeSilver, "Mother, Child, and Two Soldier," 1848, Wood Engraving.

Commencement of the Guerilla Warfare.

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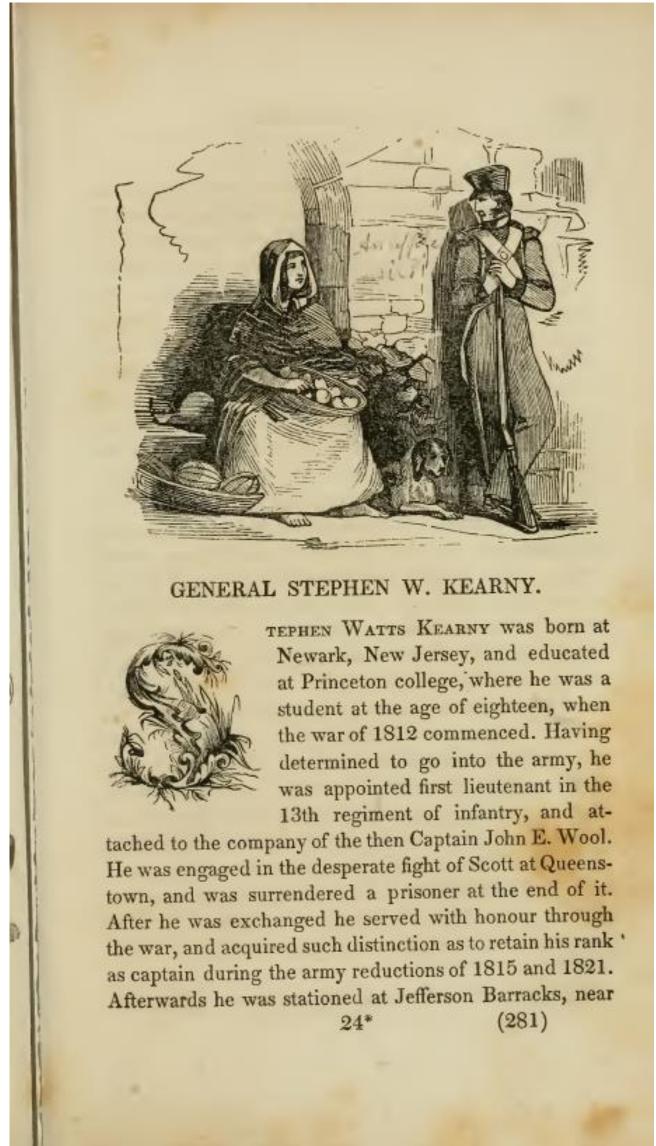
Figure 9. Charles DeSilver, "Commencement of the Guerilla Warfare," 1848, Wood Engraving.


GENERAL STEPHEN W. KEARNY.

STEPHEN WATTS KEARNY was born at Newark, New Jersey, and educated at Princeton college, where he was a student at the age of eighteen, when the war of 1812 commenced. Having determined to go into the army, he was appointed first lieutenant in the 13th regiment of infantry, and attached to the company of the then Captain John E. Wool. He was engaged in the desperate fight of Scott at Queenstown, and was surrendered a prisoner at the end of it. After he was exchanged he served with honour through the war, and acquired such distinction as to retain his rank as captain during the army reductions of 1815 and 1821. Afterwards he was stationed at Jefferson Barracks, near

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Figure 10. Charles DeSilver, "Soldier and Women with a Fruit Basket," 1848, Wood Engraving.

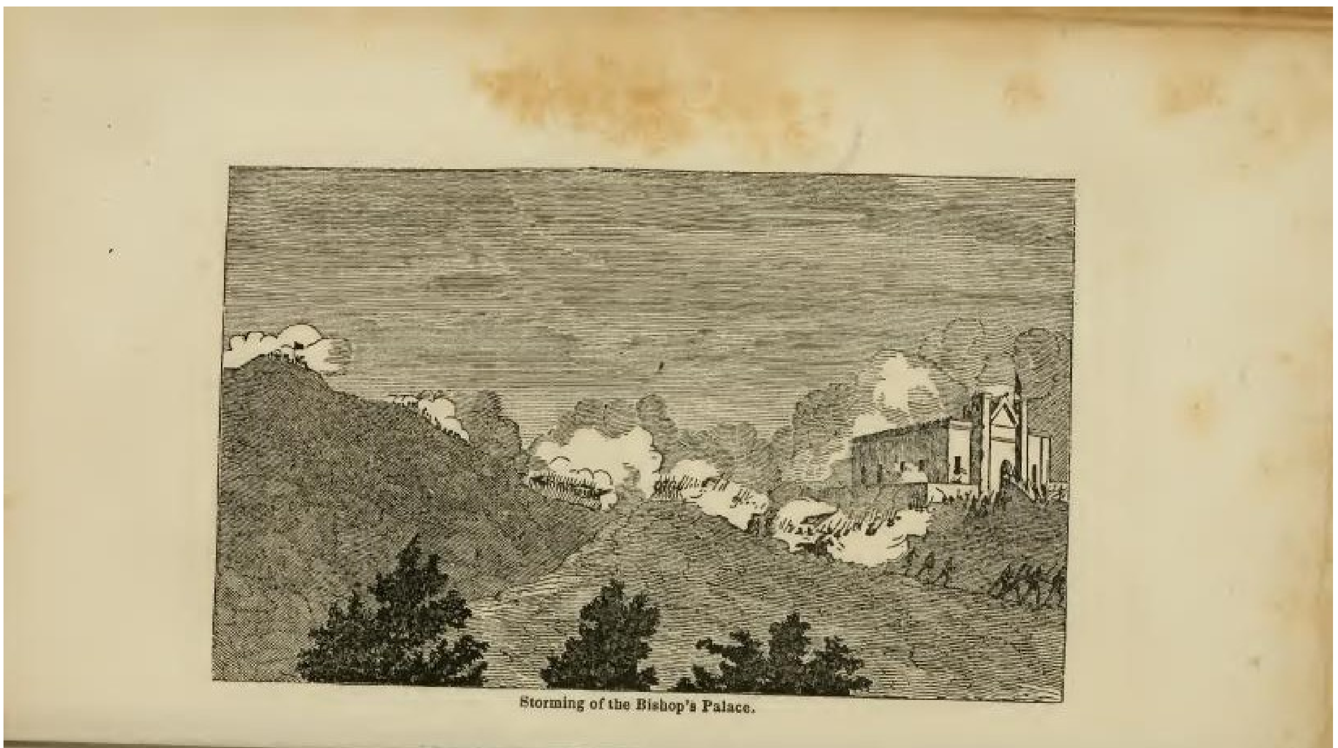

Figure 11. Charles DeSilver, "Storming of the Bishop's Palace," 1848, Wood Engraving.