

THE FASCINATING

& TRUE STORY

of the

TERRITORIAL CHARTER

of

Silver City, NM





Town seal of Silver City. The original seal was commissioned in 1881.



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Editor: Bart Roselli

Writing and Design: Joseph Bryce

Cover Art: Erin Griffith

Proofreading: Jo Lutz

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Mayor Ken Ladner

Greetings,

On behalf of the Town of Silver City I would like to welcome you to the One Hundred and Forty Second Anniversary Celebration of our Territorial Charter and hope that you will enjoy all of today's activities.

Our Territorial Charter came into being after years of conflict between the citizens of Grant County and its heart, Silver City, and the New Mexico Territorial Legislature. Finally, fed up being denied equal representation, and being dominated by the corrupt "Santa Fe Gang", the citizens rose up in rebellion, even threatening to secede from the New Mexico Territory and become annexed to the Arizona Territory. Not unaware of the many valuable resources including mineral, lumber production, ranching, import and export trade, as well as others, Santa Fe relented, and on February 15, 1878, granted Silver City its own charter.

This charter, and the self-governance it provided, resulted in Silver City, being able to incorporate as a town, set taxes, establish free public schools, and as described in an Albuquerque newspaper, become "the only real American town in New Mexico." The newspaper added that it was also "the liveliest and most enterprising."

That we still are! And if you are a visitor to our town, I will also add that we are one of the friendliest, and accepting, places around. We welcome you to this unique local celebration that commemorates Silver City's roots, while looking forward to a happy and prosperous future.

Ken Ladner
Silver City Mayor

Silver City is Born

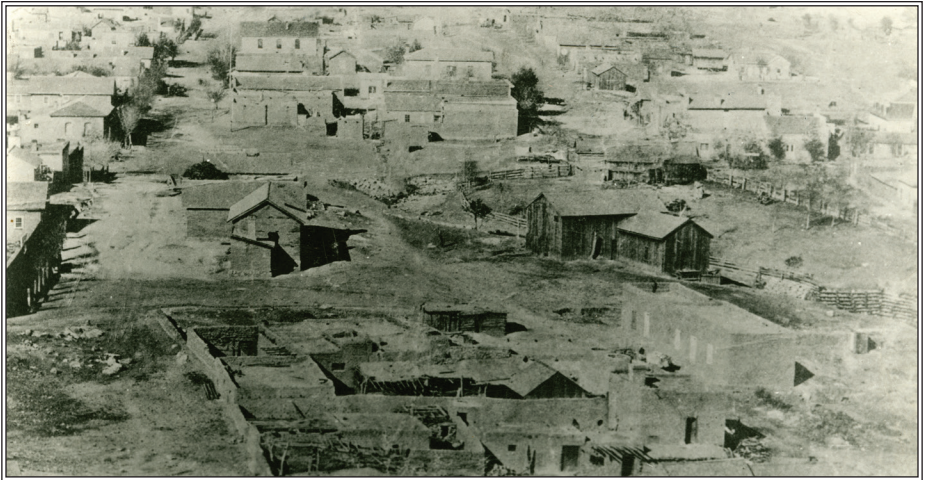


In 1869, settlers from Pinos Altos arrived in the grassy valley known as La Ciénaga de San Vicente. This group, including the Bullard brothers, William Milby, James McGee, and A.J. Hurlburt, began building log cabins in what would later become downtown. They soon cleared enough of the rushes growing in the nearby wetlands to make fields for growing corn and vegetables. Their intent was to sell food to the local miners in the area. The land around this grassy valley area was still the homeland of the Apache. Fort Bayard posted two infantrymen here to protect the settlers' interests.

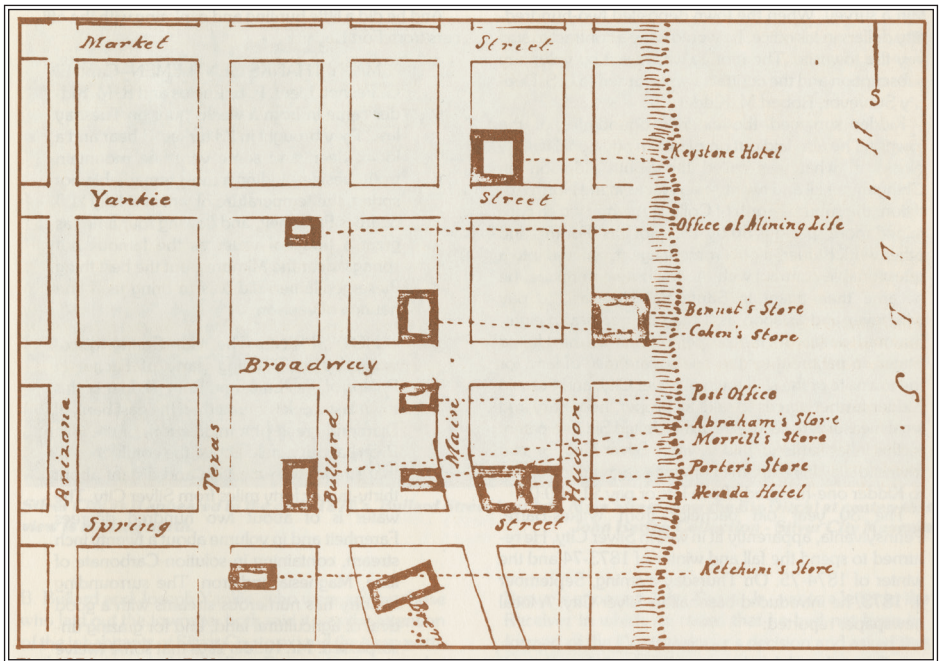
One year later, they travelled to Ralston, New Mexico, because of the excitement over a silver rush there. While there they were shown specimens of silver ore. They said, "If that's silver ore, we know where there is plenty of it." The men immediately returned to what would become Silver City and staked a claim called the Legal Tender Mine. The locality around the fledgling community was given the name "The Silver Flat Mining District". That same year, 1870, the men discovered that the hills surrounding them were filled with silver ore. They quickly turned from farming to mining.

One account of the naming of Silver City describes a community meeting during the summer of 1870 at the Legal Tender Corral, owned by A.J. Hurlburt. Many of the 'old-timers' wanted to keep the name San Vicente for the town, but after a heated discussion the majority voted for 'Silver City'. Richard Hudson, who attended the meeting, said it was "one hell of a name to call a town on a mud flat."

Silver City had a lot of growing to do, but the inhabitants already had an eye on growth and the future. Brick and adobe would soon replace log cabins. The small community would be the fastest-growing in the region and become the county seat. Silver City was on the rise and eager to make its place in the world.



Early 1870's view of Silver City looking north with Bullard on the left and Main on the right.
 Courtesy of Silver City Museum



Taken from an 1874 map by A.Z. Huggins. Shows the early layout of Silver City; the block patterns and street names are still in use.
 Courtesy of Silver City Museum

Silver City Grows



In 1870, shortly after the silver rush began, there were eighty people living in thirty houses. There was a grocery, a freight office, a law office, two blacksmith shops, three carpenter shops, and a saw mill. David Abraham, whose sons became prominent businessmen in the community, built the first brick building in 1873.

Silver City's first newspaper, *Mining Life* published its first edition in 1873. At that time, the town had fifteen saloons and three dance halls. In that year the town members hired Robert M. Kidder to survey the town site and obtain a patent for the land, one of the first steps on the path to incorporation.

The following year there were 284 houses and 51 different businesses. There were six reduction mills for processing ore, five mining furnaces, ten stores, two hotels, two printing offices, three meat markets, four carpenter shops, three barbershops, two blacksmith shops, two shoemaker shops, one livery stable, one brewery, one jewelers shop, one watchmaker's shop, two restaurants, and six saloons.

The first fire company was organized in 1875, and the *Herald* succeeded *Mining Life* as the local newspaper. However, that year may be most notable for its increase of commerce. In that year, Silver City imported more than 6,000,000 pounds of merchandise and exported 1,675,000 pounds of copper, wool, and hides. The railroad would not reach Silver City until 1883, and so supplies came in by mule-drawn freight wagons. Trade network extended throughout New Mexico and Arizona and into northern Mexico.

1876 saw the coming of speedy communications with the outside world with the town's first telegraph line. The citizens greeted it with a two-day celebration. An Arizona correspondent from Phoenix passed through the area and noted the town now contained six



West side of Main Street (1878)
Courtesy of Silver City Museum

large quartz mills, one foundry, one large planning mill, and also two steam-driven saw mills, and one large Swansea Copper furnace. Silver City was exporting between \$10,000 and \$20,000 (nearly half a million dollars in today's currency) worth of silver and gold bullion each week along with a large amount of copper. Grant County was the one of the richest regions of New Mexico. If they felt that their wealth and growth would lead to representation in the territorial government, they would be disappointed.

The Power Lay in Santa Fe



As Silver City grew, so did its aspirations as a political force in the state. Silver City leaders lobbied the State government for valuable resources to help the town grow. Unfortunately for little Silver City, corruption touched nearly every level of government. It was even a major factor in deadly situations like the Lincoln County War.

The post-Civil War territorial government of New Mexico was controlled by a group of politicians now known as the “Santa Fe Ring.” The Ring controlled the lawmakers, the political decision makers, the courts, the lawmen and those with access to them. The Ring’s power was virtually unchallengeable.

The effects of the Santa Fe Ring were felt throughout the territory. Grant County’s mining was a major industry for the territory of New Mexico, and had a growing population. However, the county was vocal against the territorial government. To keep the dissidents silent, political boundaries were modified to give Doña Ana, Lincoln, and Grant counties a combined two representatives in the territorial legislature, while smaller counties received more representatives.

A town charter would allow a growing community to elect officials, create an independent public school system, and raise its own taxes. However, applications for the incorporation of Silver City were ignored by the politicians in Santa Fe. The newly-elected Governor refused to even consider Silver City’s incorporation. They would not share power and Silver City remained underrepresented in the State government.

Frustration Reaches the Breaking Point



As the actions of the Santa Fe Ring continued to affect southern New Mexico, the citizens of Grant County sought to take action. If Santa Fe would not listen, Grant County would leave New Mexico and join Arizona. Reasons for leaving New Mexico include unfavorable laws, unequal representation in the territorial government, and the absence of a public school system, heavy taxes, and the lack of a voice in public affairs. Silver City was closer to like-minded communities in Arizona.

In 1876, plans to secede from New Mexico and join Arizona started to unfold in Silver City. Once the idea was published in the newspaper, it began to gain momentum throughout southern New Mexico. Many people in Arizona were much in favor of the notion, and supportive voices sounded out from Phoenix, Prescott, Tucson, and several other communities.

A public meeting was called on 4 October 1876 to form a committee that would further the cause of secession. In November, a proposition for annexation into Arizona was put to the people for a vote. Almost every county precinct voted unanimously. Less than twenty votes opposed the measure. Arizona's legislature approved the transition and sent a request to that effect to the United States Congress for adoption.



East side of Main Street looking north. The building on the left of the photograph housed the Herald, Silver City's only newspaper at the time. (1878)
Courtesy of Silver City Museum

A Territorial Charter Brings Independence



The idea that Grant County would split with New Mexico and join Arizona reached an anticlimactic conclusion. Arizona delegate Hiram S. Stevens introduced House Resolution 795 to request that Grant County be annexed into Arizona. The resolution was sent to the Committee on Territories where it promptly died. The rebellion had ended, but the fight took new shape in New Mexico.

A bill was submitted to the New Mexican territorial legislature on 1 February 1878 to incorporate the Town of Silver City. Though the Santa Fe Ring had neglected previous attempts, the newest version was passed unanimously by the House after suspending the rules and was then sent to the Senate. The incorporation of Silver City was approved on 14 February 1878. Although the corruption of the Santa Fe Ring continued to plague the territory, Silver City had achieved a major step for its self-determination.

The town charter outlined many of the details for Silver City's governance. The town boundaries were established as a two-mile square tract with Broadway and Main Street as its center. The charter outlines the process of elections for public officers and when those elections would take place. Silver City was allowed to collect its own taxes and enact its own laws.

Silver City held a municipal election for the first time on 2 April 1878 at the Tremont House hotel on Main Street. Robert Black was elected as the first mayor. He had trained as an architect and draftsman and originally came to Silver City to construct a quartz mill. A city council was also elected and included William Chamberlin, C.P. Crawford, John B. Morrill, and Robert V. Newsham. The people elected Martin Maher as the first treasurer, W.J. Porter as clerk, and David Tucker as marshal. All the elected officials were active members of the community and involved in commerce and mining.



The Tremont House, on the corner of Main and Yankie, was the site of the first municipal election in 1885.

Courtesy of Silver City Museum



Bennett Brothers General Merchandise Store, later the Southern Hotel (1875)

Courtesy of Silver City Museum

Silver City is One-of-a-Kind



Silver City is the only municipality in New Mexico still operating on a charter, which precedes statehood. The town had been granted unprecedented privileges and put them to use right away. Taxes raised money for such projects as paved streets, electric lighting (as early as 1884), and a city water system. Silver City blossomed under its charter and continues to elect officials and raise its own taxes.

Silver City was amongst the first in the territory to have a public school system and built the first public school building of any note. The town organized the first independent school district in the territory in 1882. The charter allowed the town to appoint teachers, construct and furnish schools, regulate the course of study, and perform all other acts pertaining to the welfare of public schools within the district. The Silver Consolidated School District is still listed as District 1 in New Mexico.

Silver Citizens have been understandably proud of their territorial charter. Through the years, they have continued to remember and celebrate their heritage. Semi-centennial celebrations were held in 1927 and 1928. The town held Frontier Days starting in the 1960s to commemorate the early days, with a special centennial celebration in 1978. In 2020, Mayor Ken Ladner declared February 15 as Territorial Charter Day.

The early inhabitants of Silver City wanted their burgeoning town to thrive and grow. They knew they would need a town charter to build their community the way they needed it. The charter they helped formulate has now been in effect for more than 140 years and is still in use. The founders would be justly proud of their accomplishment.



Vic Culberson and Governor Dick Dillon leading the Semi-Centennial Parade in 1928.
Courtesy of Silver City Museum



Entry in the 1928 Semi-Centennial Celebration.
Courtesy of Silver City Museum

To learn more about Silver City's early history see these books and articles.

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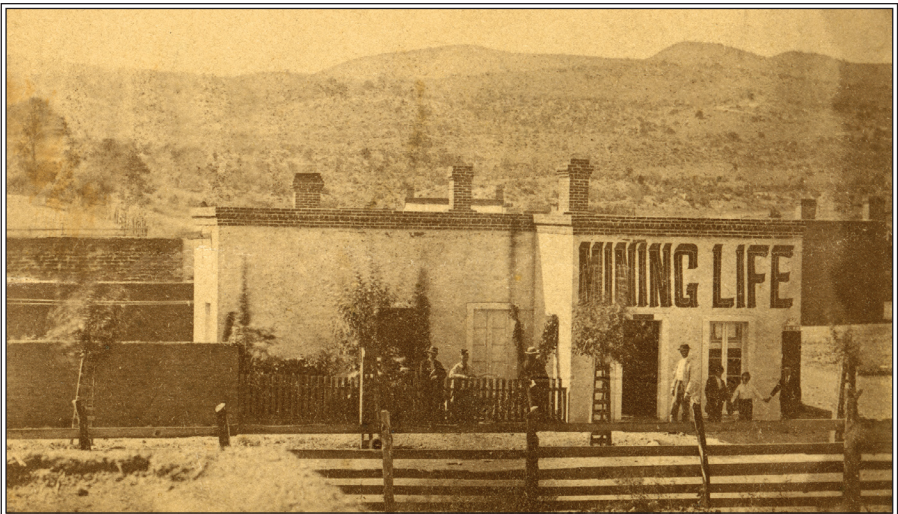
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Mining Life office building located on Texas and Yankee Streets. The building housed Silver City's first newspapers (c. 1875)
Courtesy of Silver City Museum

Mayor Ken Ladner expresses a special thanks to the Territorial Charter Day Planning Committee.

Bart Roselli, Silver City Museum, Committee Chair

Cecilia Bell, Fort Bayard Historic Preservation Society

Joseph Bryce, Silver City Museum

Steve Chavira, Silver City Grant County Chamber of Commerce

Ken Dayer, Silver City Public Library

Doug Dinwiddie, Fort Bayard Historic Preservation Society

Lillian Galloway, Silver City Public Library

Al Gamboa, Silver City Museum Society

Paula Geisler, Common Ground Art Gallery

Amanda Gomez, Silver City Museum

Erin Griffith, Silver City Museum

Kevin Lenkner, Mimbres Region Arts Council

Jo Lutz, Silver City Museum

Patsy Madrid, Vintage Fantasies

Cissy McAndrew, Green Chamber of Commerce

Mike Morones, Silver City Mayor, retired

Alfred Ogas, WNMU Alumni Organization

Kim Pearce, community volunteer

Laura Phelps, Freeport McMoRan

Thomas Ryan, Silver City Chief of Police, retired

Joseph Saenz, Wolf Horse Outfitters

Mario Sanchez, WNMU

Nick Seibel, Silver City Daily Press

For more information
on the town of Silver City and its unique history,
please visit the Silver City Museum located at
312 West Broadway, Silver City, NM. Or visit us at

www.silvercitymuseum.org

