

Las Animas / Vigil & St. Vrain Land Grant

Petitioning Governor Armijo on December 8, 1843, Cornelio Vigil and Ceran St. Vrain were poised to become two of the largest landowners in the history of the United States. With over four million acres at stake, Vigil and St. Vrain told the Mexican government that they had big plans for the development of the land by agriculture and raising livestock. The land was used primarily for cattle grazing by William Bransford, William Bent, and Ceran St. Vrain.

St. Vrain was unable to lure colonists onto the land until ten years after the grant agreement, and even then most of them were his own employees and their families. Furthermore, there were no claims or settlements on the Las Animas Grant until the early 1860's which painted a picture to the courts of a deserted land with absentee landlords. As such Vigil and St. Vrain were seen as breaking the original land grant agreement.

Like the Nolan Grant the Vigil heirs (Vigil was murdered during the 1847 Taos Pueblo Uprising) and Ceran St. Vrain were stripped of their original land grants and provided with much smaller 97,000 acres by the United States Congress. This situation was complicated by Vigil & St. Vrain overselling the original land grant.

By 1846 they technically didn't even have stake in their original claim as they had sold several one-sixth shares to fort owner and trader Charles Bent, New Mexico Governor Manuel Armijo, New Mexico Secretary Donaciano Vigil, and Trinidad townsite promoter Eugene Leitensdorfer.

The subsequent owners assumed that the Congressional Act would eventually be overturned by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo or a Supreme Court decision, and continued to sell as many parcels of land to speculators as possible before the land could be officially surveyed.

In one case settlers on the land grant claimed by both Leitensdorfer and his rival Captain William Craig created the Settlers' Purgatorie Relief Association in order to protect themselves from the ensuing attacks on their property. In another case, David Moffat and Jerome Chaffee were both accused of obtaining fraudulent land patents for fictitious property owners so that they could assert their claims to the West Las Animas townsite.

The land grant had quickly become a dangerously out-of control land grab.

It soon became obvious that the federal government had to settle this land dispute which resulted in Congress ordering an official survey of the awarded 97,000 acres.

The land was split up with the Vigil and St. Vrain heirs getting first priority, pioneers who had interests deeded to them secondly, and settlers third. After half a century of

court proceedings twenty three land owners had their claims rejected, thirteen had their land claims approved, with not one of the original land grantee heirs benefiting at all.

Note: email from Lonnie:

It was probably granted to them before the United States "acquired" the land from Mexico. Sometimes those claims were honored, and sometimes, probably depending on circumstances, they were not. The land probably belonged to Francisco and Dagle and then when, or even before, it was opened up to Americans a settlement grew up in the area and they felt like they had a legitimate claim. The US government may even have given them title to it.

<http://www.spanishpeakscountry.com/FortFrancisco.aspx>

Huerfano County Colorado

Georgia Colony

Transcription - Letter of James A Erwin, MD

March 30, 1874

Spanish Peaks, Huerfano Co Col. Teri.

March the 30th. 1874.

H. T Bell Esq. M.H.R.

Dear Sir,

Being an Emmigrant from N.E. Ga. three years ago, I together with a large Collony of Georgians of North Carolina, settled in Huerfano County Southern Col. Upon a tract of land known as the St. Verain & Verheil Grant, claimed by John Francisco and Henry Dagle. Congress having in a recent act, confirmed to each Grantee eleven Leagues each, as you will learn from a Petition transmitted to the land Commissioner at Washington, by the Squatters upon this aforesaid tract claimed by Francisco & Dagle. We here by solicit your aid, together with other friends who may be designated to you by other private letters qc. For which in return we propose to remunerate you, & for which you will ever have our greatful Thanks, if you think you can accomplish this obligation we desire. These Claimants are contending for their claims in serious zig

zag forms so as to monopolize the entire Valleys upon the water streams leaving out perarie and bluffs, which will entirely disorganize and almost ruin our county and turn our wives & little ones out of doors. Now I ask the seame of Heaven, & everything that is sacred will the authorities at Washington suffer our Citizens to be dragged from their homes & firesides for the sake of a few monopolizing thieves who it is certain never paid the government farthing for, will they do it, if so we would do justice to say to our friend in the states do not come here, for The West if full of Spanish Grants, & other land swindles, & there is no certainty that you will find quiet homes in the West.

Fir upon this claim not in questions we have very extensive, & valuable imtournaments. The settlers have been her from 2 to 8 years. We have established Churches & schools & have comparatively speaking a good society, ...

The amount of their improvements, are nothing. To compare with that of the settlers & moreover, they are not contending for their main improved lands, but for a portion of land including their buildings, which is wilde lands, and the improvements made upon it is made by the Squatters. Shall we now be draget from our homes, give up our hones labour, & be forced to seek homes elsewhere. If that is justice & must acknowledge that I have never been in possession of the principle. The writer of this letter is a Nephew of the Emmigrants on this Claim are from Georgia & Sir as native citizens with yourself. We Respectfully appeal to you for succor, ...

Your unworthy & obedient servant,.

Jas. A. Erwin, M.D.

<http://www.kmitch.com/Huerfano/franclaim.html>

THIS APPEARS TO BE A PARAPHRASING OF THE ORIGINAL LETTER (ABOVE) THE ORIGINAL WAS WRITTEN BY DR. ERWIN FOR THE CLAIMENTS. I INCLUDE IT BECAUSE IT LISTS THE SIGNERS; ALL I HAD BEFORE FINDING THIS WAS THE LETTER.

Spanish Peaks, Huerfano Co, Col. Terr.
March the 28th, 1874

The citizens of Huerfano Co. to the COMMISSIONER OF THE General Land Office,
Washington D.C.
Greeting.

Dear Sir,

Your petitioners occupants on the derivative claim of John Francisco & Henry Dagle understand that the award made to the aforesaid Claimants of (1720) acres of Land made at the Land Office of Pueblo, is not satisfactory, and from which they demur and will attempt to obtain more land. Having through their lawyers, or Agents sent a plea to your office, asking for about twelve (12) sections more, and representing it as being unoccupied Land.

Now while we don't wish to interfere so as to complicate the adjustment of these claims, not to detract one iota from the legitimate rights of the contesting party, we would respectfully represent that every quarter section of the twelve (12) sections which they wish to claim in addition to the award of (1720) acres are claimed and occupied by squatters who have been in possession of it from two (2) to eight (8) years and have made extensive and valuable improvements upon the Land.

That justice may be done to all parties we invite your attention to the above fact and remonstrate against any and all attempts to misrepresent the case so as to misguide you in your judicial deliberations. We hope this memorial may be beneficial in meting the demands of justice, and assist you in making an early adjustment of these claims for which your subscribers will ever pray.

Spanish Peaks, Col Terr.
March the 28th, 1874

James A. Erwin, M.D.
H. Barnard
John McClure
John M. Brown
J.L. Ezell
J.P. Denton
J.J. McLane
Saml. Patterson
J.P. Kerby
B.F. Harris
Wm. P. Erwin
John Erwin
David Hart
Wm. Baker
C.L. Dodgin
P.N. Tiger
George Ritchen
Jo. Westmorland
T.F. Worthington
J.R. Garren
J.M. Alexander
H.M. Dempsey
Henry Steven
Amos Hayse
Anna Garren, widow

Jasper Bruce
J. England
Thomas Modill
Albert Phillips
R. Patterson
B. Patterson
John E. Earl
A.J. McClure
G.W. Sitton
William Carver
T.J. Erwin
Jesee Walker
B.F. Chastain
Thomas Erwin
E. Gribble, Esq.
J. Gribble
Jas. Berry
Smith Crumley
Wm. Prater
Shelton Prater
S. Dyer
J. Dyer
Joseph Carver
Jesse Garren
Chapel Crumly
T. Crumly

The above subscriber's names were transcribed from an original of their own signatures.

Beside the above subscribers there are about (30) thirty families living on the original claim of Francisco & Dagne, whose signatures are not to this memorial.

Jpgs of original letter below:

Spanish Peaks, Huerfano Co. Col. Terr.

March the 30th. 1874.

H. J. Bell Esq. M. H. R.

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The object we desire. These Claimants are contending for their Claims in various zigzag forms so as to monopolize the entire Valley upon the waterstreams leaning out perania & bluffs. which will entirely disorganize and almost ruin our County, & turn our wives & little ones out of doors. now I ask in the name of Heaven, & every thing that is sacred will the authorities at Washington suffer our Citizens to be dragged from their homes & firesides for the sake of a few monopolizing thieves who it is certain never paid the government farthing for, will they do it, if so we would do justice to say to our friends in the states dont come here, for the west is full of Spanish Grants, & other land swindles, & there is no certainty that you will find quiet homes in the west.

Sir, upon this claim now in question we have very extensive, & valuable, improvements. The settlers have been here from 2 to 8 years we have established Churches & Schools & have comparatively speaking good society, &c.

The amount of their improvements, are nothing
to compare with that of the settlers, & moreover
they are not contending for their main
improved lands, but for a portion of land
including their buildings, which is public
lands, and the improvements made upon it, is
made by the squatters, shall we now be
dragged from our homes, give up our homes
labour, & be forced to seek home elsewhere,
if this is justice & must acknowledge that I
have never been in possession of the principle.
The writer of this letter is a nephew of
Samuel Patterson of N.C. Ga. now a citizen
of Southern Cal. A large majority of
the emigrants on this claim are from Georgia
& live as native citizens with yourself. We
respectfully appeal to you for success, &c.
Your unworthy, & obedient servant,
Jas. A. Erwin M.D.