

Sigmund Seligman: A Santa Fe Trader and His Colt Revolver

By Jim Taylor

With the opening of the Santa Fe Trail after Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, an intense period of trade began, fueled by the demand for goods from the eastern United States. Before this, trade from outside New Spain was severely curtailed by Spanish authorities in Mexico City. Early explorers/traders such as Zebulon Pike learned harsh lessons through capture and internment by the forces of New Spain. Among the early traders were numerous German-Jewish entrepreneurs such as the Staabs, Spiegelbergs, Ilfelds, Floersheims, and Seligmans (Figure 1). By about 1850, these families had opened trading posts in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, NM, and El Paso, TX, and had established themselves as leaders in economic and political life. Their descendants are still strongly active in these communities.

Born in Gan-Algesheim near the Rhine River in Germany around 1820, Sigmund, one of eight Seligman brothers, settled in Santa Fe in 1849, having first worked in Philadelphia. After arriving via the famous trail, he formed a partnership with Charles Clever, another German from Cologne. The trading firm was known as “Seligman and



Clever” (Figure 2) and was located on the Santa Fe plaza next to the infamous Exchange Hotel (Figure 3), now the site of the famous La Fonda at the end of the Santa Fe Trail (where many of you stayed during the American Society of Arms

Collectors meeting of October 2009). Sigmund’s brothers, Adolph and Bernard, followed to join the partnership in 1856. Clever left the firm to successfully pursue a career in law and politics, and the business became known as “Seligman Bros.” Thus far, no journals or diaries of the brothers’ travels along the trail have come to light, but one record notes that in Kansas City, the brothers loaded 83 wagons in one day with 5000 pounds each of goods for their store, with a value of \$200,000. The shipment included such hard goods as “iron pumps, skillets, ploughs, nails, bars of lead, sad irons, gun locks, bullet molds, etc.” Sales of the company were reported to total \$10 million during the life of the company.



Figure 1. Freighters on the Santa Fe Trail are shown. From left, Bernard Seligman, Zadoc Staab, and Lehman Spiegelberg pose with Kiowa Indians.



Figure 2. The Seligman and Clever Trading Post.

In about 1851, Sigmund also owned a business as a daguerreotype photographer, with a small studio on the Santa Fe plaza. He was associated with William Messervy, who became acting governor of the territory in 1854 (Figure 4). The photo of Messervy in Figure 4 shows his first or second model square back trigger guard, 1851 Colt revolver in his belt. He looks like the sort of governor we could use today. Sigmund's brother Bernard served as a captain and

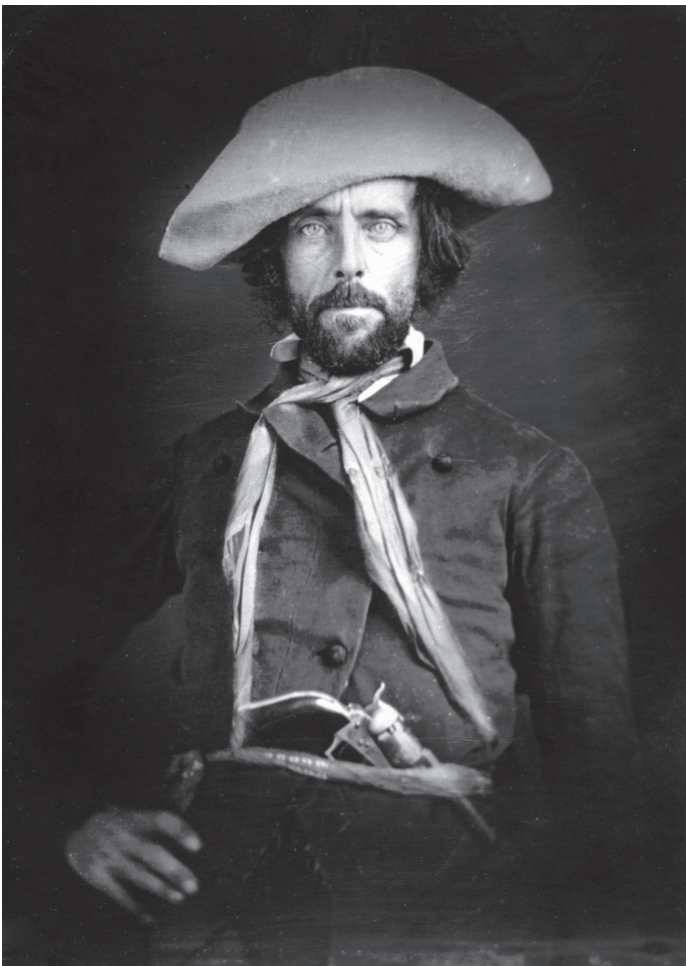


Figure 4. Governor William Messervy.



Figure 3. The Exchange Hotel.

quartermaster in the Union Army during the Civil War Battle of Valverde, NM, in March 1862.

Bernard Seligman became treasurer and a member of territorial legislature. He later returned to Philadelphia where he died in 1903. His son, Arthur, served as mayor of Santa Fe and as state governor from 1930 to 1933. Meanwhile, Sigmund continued with the business and was appointed Santa Fe County Commissioner in 1876, the year of his death.

Sigmund's death was reported in *The Daily New Mexican* on October 5, 1876, having suffered a "violent stroke of paralysis" near Fort Craig, NM, the day before. He was 46 years old, had never married, and had no heirs.

Although they were active and successful figures in early New Mexico, the Seligmans did not lead the well-documented lives of some of their contemporaries such as Kit Carson and Generals Steven Watts Kearney and James H. Carleton who were fighting Indians and outlaws. As merchants and civic leaders, they made great contributions to the communities that they helped to establish. In fact, the Seligmans were instrumental in acquiring the last surviving Barlow and Sanderson stagecoach that had traveled the Santa Fe Trail in the 1860s. This coach was involved in a hold-up on Raton Pass during which two people were killed and \$60,000 stolen. Today it is housed in the Palace of the Governors on the Santa Fe Plaza.

SIGMUND SELIGMAN'S 1851 COLT NAVY REVOLVER

Although Sigmund does not seem to have a record of armed confrontation, it is a given that the general population of Santa Fe offered some risk to merchants and trail traders. Life along the trail was perilous, with Indian raids and banditry common. It is logical that Sigmund was armed to protect himself against these hazards. Witness the earlier photo (Figure 1) of his brother, Bernard, and his associates including Kiowa



Figure 5. Seligman's 1851 Colt brass grip detail.

Indians, all equipped with long arms, pistols, and bow and arrow. This probably typifies the appearance of the trail freighters and their Kiowa guides.

What type of firearm was carried by Seligman? Among the considerable amount of published literature and primary documents available in the New Mexico State Archives and the Palace of the Governors Fray Angelico Chaves History Library, there is little mention of firearms. Only the photo referenced above shows such equipment.

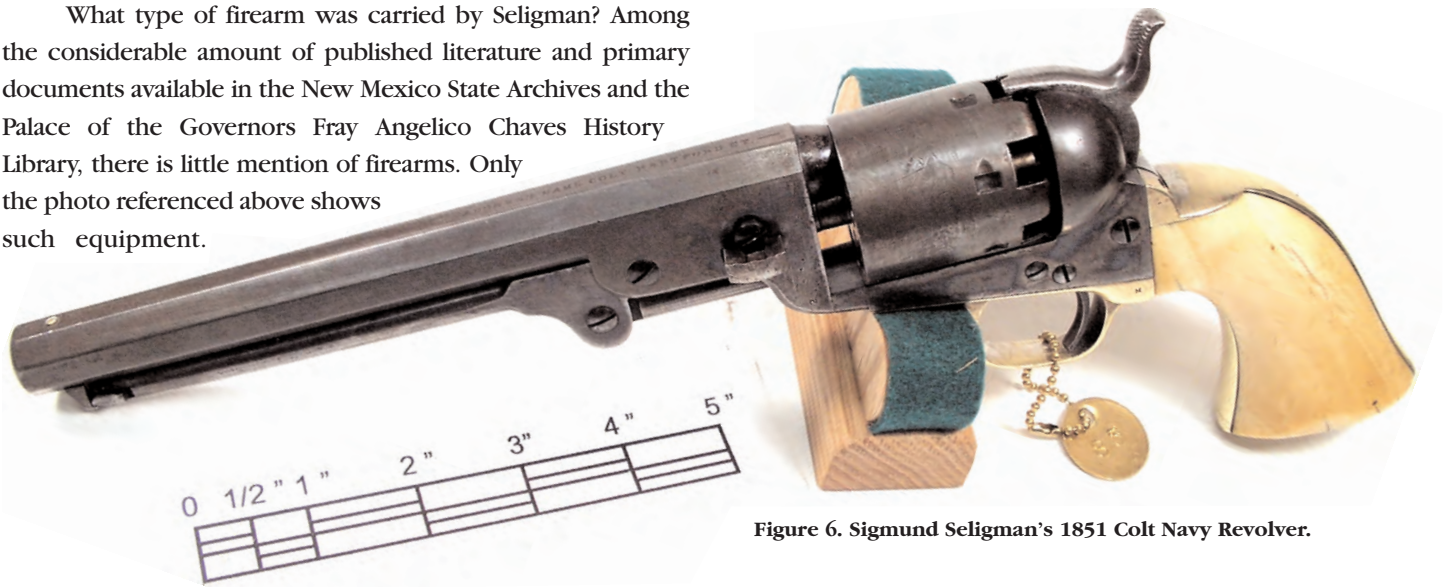


Figure 6. Sigmund Seligman's 1851 Colt Navy Revolver.

It would stand to reason that successful traders in the 1850s would arm themselves with the best and latest percussion guns, such as Hawken's plains rifles and Colt's revolvers.

As a resident of Santa Fe, I have long been a student of the rich history of New Mexico, focusing on the firearms of settlers from the Spanish colonists through the Civil War. As such, the Jewish traders, well-documented and featured in the museums of New Mexico, were just of passing interest to me. However, at the May 2009 Denver Gun Show, my friend and a well-respected dealer from Gettysburg, PA, John Hayes, showed me a Colt model 1851 percussion revolver with the back strap showing clear period engraving reading "S. Seligman. Santa Fe. N.M." (Figure 5). A quick call to my wife, Sarah, who researched through Google, revealed that there



Figure 7. Seligman's 1851 Colt grip detail.

were two S. Seligmans: Sigmund and Sigfried. The latter, another relative from Germany, appeared on the scene about 1900 and established a trading post in Bernalillo, near Albuquerque. Sigmund and the revolver coincided in time and place, so it seems logical that the revolver belonged to him.

The 1851 Colt revolver, serial number 87295 (Figure 6) was manufactured in 1858 with a 7 1/2-inch barrel and .36 caliber percussion. All of the numbers match, including inside of the original, somewhat stressed ivory grips (Figure 7). It is a three-screw, large-trigger-guard fourth model in excellent condition. It shows bright case

colors on the frame and hammer, and abundant fading blue on the barrel and cylinder. There is slight holster wear on the muzzle. The roll-engraved naval cylinder scene is clear (Figure 8). The brass grip frame and trigger guard show traces of silver plate in protected areas. The barrel marking,

“—Address Sam^l Colt Hartford Ct.—” is consistent with the serial number. All screws are original and bright (Figure 9). The overall fine condition of the revolver does not support heavy use on the trail, but rather as a carry piece in Sigmund’s “Seligman and Clever” Santa Fe store which opened in 1856.

The significance of this Colt is its tie to the early opening of trade via the Santa Fe Trail. Having reviewed collections and literature from various sources, I know of no other firearm inscribed to its trail-trading owner. The only evidence lacking



Figure 8. Seligman’s 1851 Colt cylinder detail and serial number.



Figure 9. Seligman’s 1851 Colt serial numbers.

is an image of Sigmund Seligman with his Colt. In fact, no image of Sigmund has been found after exhaustive searches in the New Mexico State Archives and on the internet with Seligman family members and out-of-state collections. I will continue the search, and will hope such image will come to light.

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