

## Biographical Sketch of James Wiley Magoffin

by RICHARD C. WHITE

AS THE FIRST of the names from our pioneer history to be inscribed in the El Paso Hall of Honor, The El Paso Historical Society proudly names a man who was one of the real pioneers of the vast area we now call the American southwest.

James Wiley Magoffin was born on the frontier, in Harrodsburg, Kentucky, in 1799. It cannot be said with certainty when he first visited El Paso on the Rio Grande. But as early as the eighteen thirties he was known with great affection as "Don Santiago" up and down the historic *Camino Real* which connected Mexico City and Santa Fé through the Pass of the North. State Department records show he was named American Consul in the Mexican city of Saltillo in 1825. In 1830 he married a daughter of one of the first families of Chihuahua, Maria Gertrudis Valdez.

Some time in the eighteen forties, he is known to have entered with his younger brother, Samuel, into the historic trade of the Santa Fé Trail, from Independence, Missouri, to the capital of New Mexico; although there are indications that he entered this business much earlier.

In 1846, the United States government took advantage of Mr. Magoffin's wide acquaintance and popularity throughout the New Mexico area. At the insistence of Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, President Polk invited Magoffin to Washington and gave him an assignment of great historic importance. To put it all too briefly, he was to sell the political and military leaders of New Mexico on the idea that it would be to their advantage to be a part of the United States of America. As Magoffin expressed it in his official report to the Secretary of War:

I assured Governor Armijo that I had been dispatched by the President of the United States in order to inform him and the rest of the good people of New Mexico with whom I was acquainted that the only object of our government was to give peace and protection to the inhabitants. I found many of the rich of the department here, also the militia officers, with whom I had ample intercourse. I assured them the only object of our government was to take possession of New Mexico as being a part of the territory annexed to the United States by Texas and to give peace and quietude to the good people of the country — which gave them entire satisfaction.

General Kearny and his forces were able to enter the city of Santa Fé without the firing of a shot and were received with great ceremony and celebration. Having succeeded so well in Santa Fé, James

Magoffin hurried southward toward Chihuahua, hoping to perform the same kind of service for General John E. Wool. In this he was less successful. He was imprisoned as a spy, but his great influence and reputation among Mexican officers and public officials enabled him to escape being executed and to be released at the close of the war.

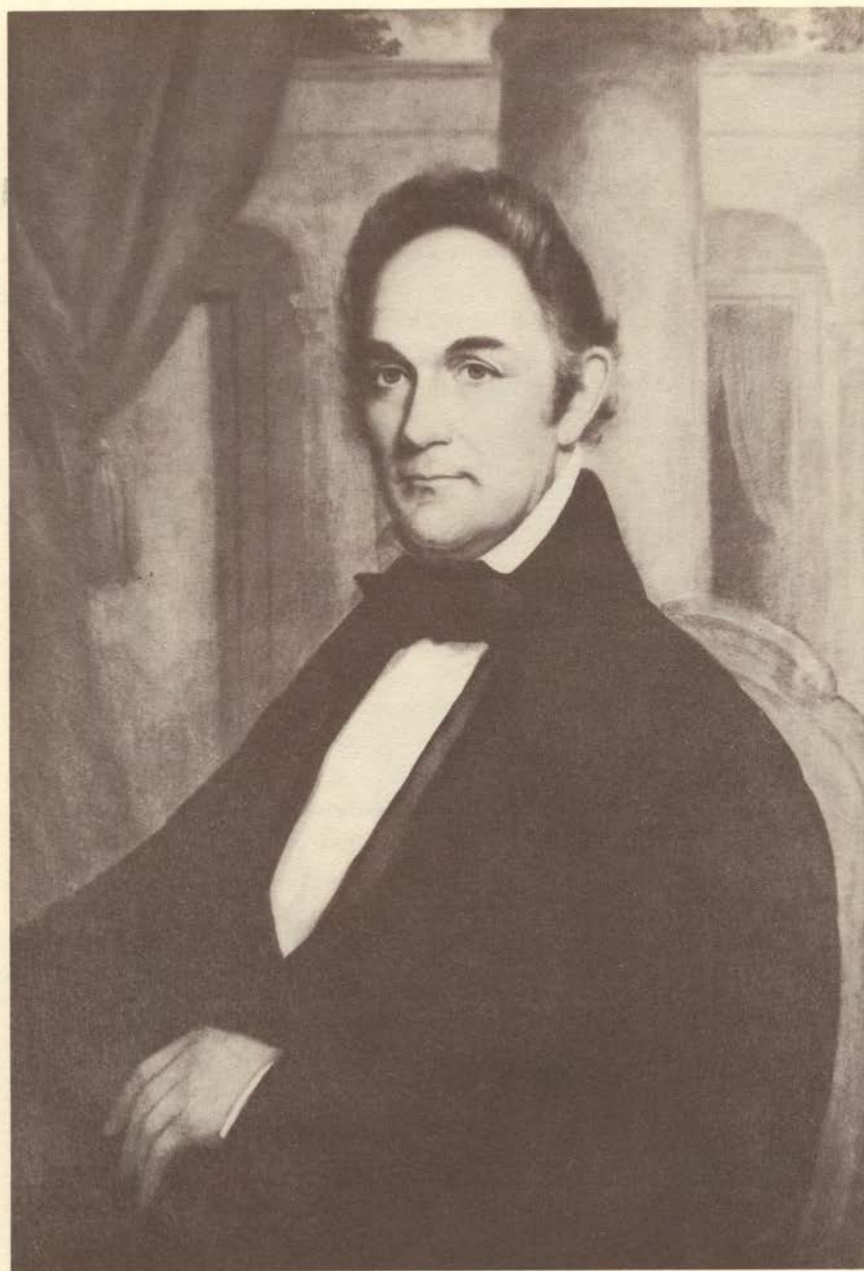
Shortly after the peace treaty ended the Mexican War and made the present site of El Paso a part of the United States, Magoffin built here at the Pass a magnificent hacienda and trading post known as Magoffinsville. It became a center of great hospitality for travelers to and from Santa Fé or California through this important cross-roads. Here the early officers of the Military Post of El Paso found a hearty welcome, and in 1854 the post was moved to Magoffinsville and re-named Fort Bliss. It is this Magoffinsville post which is commemorated by the present Fort Bliss replica.

When Commissioner John Bartlett brought his Boundary Commission here in 1852, he made Magoffinsville his headquarters. The portrait of James Magoffin which now hangs in the old Magoffin home on Magoffin Avenue was painted by H. C. Pratt, the artist of the Boundary Commission.

Magoffinsville, like many another settlement, became a casualty of the War Between the States. Its proprietor was an important supplier of the Confederates, and his two sons Joseph and Samuel both saw service for the South. Samuel gave his life. His strenuous activity in behalf of the Confederacy broke James Magoffin's health and he died in 1868 at the age of 69, in San Antonio.

But his roots were deep in El Paso. The old hacienda gave way to the ravages of war and the encroachments of the Rio Grande, but his son Joseph returned here and built another beautiful home which is standing today, the home of his daughter Josephine and her husband, General William J. Glasgow.

Tonight we honor the pioneer, the man who left his name and the result of his works a permanent part of the El Paso heritage.



JAMES WILEY MAGOFFIN