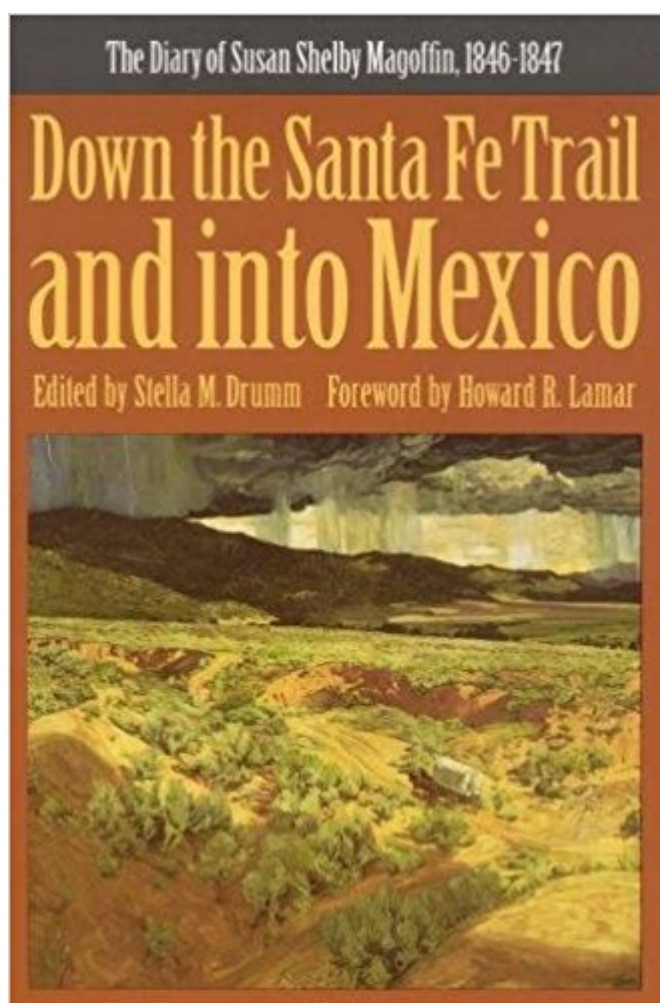


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# Down The Santa Fe Trail And Into Mexico: The Diary Of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847 (American Tribal Religions)



## Synopsis

In June 1846 Susan Shelby Magoffin, eighteen years old and a bride of less than eight months, set out with her husband, a veteran Santa Fe trader, on a trek from Independence, Missouri, through New Mexico and south to Chihuahua. Her travel journal was written at a crucial time, when the Mexican War was beginning and New Mexico was occupied by Stephen Watts Kearny and the Army of the West. Her journal describes the excitement, routine, and dangers of a successful merchant's wife. On the trail for fifteen months, moving from house to house and town to town, she became adept in Spanish and the lingo of traders, and wrote down in detail the customs and appearances of places she went. She gave birth to her first child during the journey and admitted, "This thing of marrying is not what it is cracked up to be." Valuable as a social and historical record of her encounters she met Zachary Taylor and was agreeably disappointed to find him disheveled but kindly her journal is equally important as a chronicle of her growing intelligence, experience, and strength, her lost illusions and her coming to terms with herself.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"One of the finest journals by women in 19th century America, Susan Magoffin's book not only gives us a sparkling account of the beauties of the Southwest and its history, but also signals a distinct change in American perception of Mexicans, whom she learned to admire and respect, even in a time of hostility and war." Sandra Myres, editor, *Ho for California: Women's Overland Diaries from the Huntington Library* (Sandra Myres)

Her journal describes the excitement, routine, and dangers of a successful merchant's wife. On the trail for fifteen months, moving from house to house and town to town, she became adept in Spanish and the lingo of traders, and wrote down in detail the customs and appearances of places she went.

It is with some awe in my own breast that I write a review for this remarkable little book, which is a "Historical Diary" and therefore of importance to those who would study history from the human element rather than strictly through footnotes. I offer a quote taken from her that struck me as one of the most unique I have heard uttered - flowing from the mind through the pen and on to posterity from of one of the Pioneers; the raw honesty springing from the personal epic she never designed for others other than family to ever see: "There is such Independence, so much free, uncontaminated air, which impregnates the mind, the feelings, nay, every thought, with purity. I breathe free without that oppression and uneasiness felt in the gossiping circles felt in the settled home." The writer is not polished; but her work was never intended to be published. What makes it so intriguing is that she managed to capture the moment, the time, complete with names, descriptions of the country and the peoples as she was thoughtfully living it, something most of us would either not think of doing, or be distracted in the monumental tasks of everyday work in such an environment. Which brings me to the crux of the matter in a hurry: this woman, though very young, was educated, had married a mature, much older man who had a thriving, though fraught with danger Trade business established on the fringes of the frontiers. She was pampered throughout the journey; yet never seemed to take it for granted. As a result, she could write enthusiastically of events and gather wildflowers at will, almost as a scientific mode arising unintentioned from the moment; this free, unencumbered freedom from heavy responsibility obviously was one of the things that allowed her to devote her time, energy and full attention to matters of the day that were happening around her, while her servants did the mundane work. This alertness is felt throughout the book, even in the midst of the terror of Mexican and Indian attacks that came within miles of their supply train. I don't know how much of this she went back and wrote with a steadier hand, but it appears that she was in full self-control at all times, even during these times of high stress. Her devotion to her husband is genuine, and is felt in a way much different than many diaries I have read. It seems as though their union was one of love, companionship; yet comprised of a strong sense of individualism, another idea that was rare within that era of female domination. She describes the grass, the cold, sweet limestone water, the suffering of the animals

when lack of feed and water arose - it made no difference - the wagons must travel on. In short, she wrote what is possibly one of the most accurate, historical accountings, unembellished of the Santa Fe Trail at that time simply because she didn't know she was doing it. If you love old Southwest history, American Frontier History of any kind, you will enjoy this book.

Rarely, even a dedicated bookworm, who has imbibed innumerable books on a plethora of subjects, encounters a story where a narrator's voice becomes alive, distinct and unique. Susan Shelby Magoffin's diary, from 1846-1847, reveals a young American woman wise beyond her years, a delightful encounter between author and reader. The hardships of the journey down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico exacted a severe toll on Susan's health - she died at 28. But what a richly lived life this intelligent, finely observant individual had. Her diary expands beyond the confines of its subject matter, to a larger relevance of what a gift it is to look through another's eyes, into their consciousness from long ago, share for awhile their intimate world. There is one drawback to this memoir: the totally heavy-handed editing of Susan's diary in the 1920's by the prudish and racist librarian and amateur historian Stella M. Drumm. One can be thankful that Drumm convinced Susan's daughter to allow publication of the diary, but at what cost! At least what remains has not been lost to history, as appears the case with the rest of Susan's personal journals. Drumm's stilted footnotes, added to the narrative in 1927, are quite detailed, but are outdated compared to the early original diary, and contain several historic inaccuracies. The extensive footnotes intrude on the flow of Susan's voice, and Drumm chose to exclude later writings, so that the diary ends with shocking abruptness. Susan loved her little dog Ring, and constantly mentions him through the early narrative. Suddenly, he is gone from the text, exhibiting yet more of Drumm's censorious editing decisions. It is surprising that as much of Susan's original voice remains, despite chopping by Drumm. There is room for misunderstanding when scholars attempt to box Susan into a PC corner, but that approach is irrelevant. Susan's comparison of her miscarriage to the birth of an Indian baby in Fort Bent just underlines her sadness that for all her care and an attentive physician, she still lost her baby. The love and grief of her husband and herself are beautifully described, but this is a resilient young woman, proud of her family's pioneer heritage. This and her faith give her the strength to express her curiosity about the world she and her husband explore. There is a wonderful, dry self-irony, Susan mocks herself time and again, though some may misunderstand this, when she is expressing amusement at herself and the "human condition." Encounters between herself and other cultures are not PC, but no one is spared, least of all herself. It is important to keep in mind the historic context in which this personal journal was written; given this, Susan is

remarkably open and curious about other cultures, many times comparing Spanish society as being more civilized than what she was familiar with back home. The things she is critical of, she notes honestly, but without the sweeping prejudice typical of her time period. Susan learns to speak Spanish and goes on to attend Mass in southern New Mexico and Mexico, writing respectfully of her host's culture, gardens, faith, and food, to the point of stating in pure Kentucky vernacular of 1847, "I shall make me a recipe book" (p 209). More importantly, there is a hidden narrative in these pages that Drumm did not succeed in concealing. Susan and her husband were deeply in love, his respect and cherishing of his young bride is apparent, and her delight in this clear. But Susan's voice changes tone after an encounter in Santa Fe with Dona Juliana, who intrudes upon her hospitality, coming into her home and calling her a little girl, rather than the respectful term Senora. This lady was a great "friend" of the Magoffin brothers. Samuel was 45 years old to Susan's 18 when they married months before this journey. He and his older brother James made the trip to Santa Fe many times as prosperous traders, and maintained a house near the plaza. Dona Juliana is like the snake in the grass trying to steal the joy of the couple, deriding the young bride in the guise of compliments to her husband, in a language Susan is later to become fluent in. After this woman from Sam's past shows up one more time, never to visit again, an elderly Spanish lady comes to visit, and informs Susan that she would have to teach her how to handle men better. The ebullient, effervescent lightness departs from Susan's voice after this. Then, William Magoffin, Samuel's much younger brother, arrives in Santa Fe to join their wagon train. After they depart Santa Fe, for weeks on end Susan cares for William while he is sick, not mentioning her husband at all. Susan suffers torments of guilt, stating her flesh is weak and sinful. Was she attracted to William? After one of Susan's tormented entries, there is a blank spot, where only the date remains (perhaps another instance of Drumm's editing). In El Paso, while Sam is attending business, another older woman asks Susan if she is worried that her husband might be with his other senorita. Susan states that she could have "cried her eyes out" (p 212). Although she knows her husband is loyal, it's clear he engaged in other relationships before marrying. In Mexico, Susan suffers through another pregnancy, stating that, "this thing of marrying is not what it is cracked up to be" (p 245). The diary ends soon after this. Susan gets sick and loses another child. Thankfully, she and her husband seem reconciled before the diary's abrupt end, her tone regained some of its earlier delight. After all his young wife's suffering, Sam sells their wagons and never works in the trade again, though he could have made a fortune. William too never pursues the family business, instead, he becomes a doctor. James, the older brother who helped Americans and Mexicans negotiate the territory of New Mexico, remained in the trade, based in El Paso, and made a fortune. Howard R. Lamar's introduction provides an

excellent historic context for the mysterious role of James, and the profitable business of the Santa Fe traders. Lamar mentions that Susan wrote an earlier diary as well, that "filled an entire volume," about her marriage and an "initial honeymoon trip of six months to New York and Philadelphia" (p xi). One can assume that Susan, such a wonderfully communicative and observant person, continued to document her life after the Mexican sojourn. I wish that someone would unearth Susan Hart Shelby Magoffin's earlier volume and publish it, along with any additional diaries. Superb read (not a mystery) and evocative account of NM history: *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (Vintage Classics) Another original and almost lost Western (Montana) voice: *The Story Of Mary MacLane & Other Writings* Spanish Perspective: *Romance of a Little Village Girl* (Paso Por Aqui : Series on the Nuevomexicano Literary Heritage)

Magoffin's cheerful and innocent account of travel on the Santa Fe Trail in 1846 lends a tactile reality to the lead-up to the Mexican War, a bare faced land grab proffered by President James Polk. An 18 year old newlywed at the time, Magoffin and her 45 year old trader husband ride with a caravan amid the "Army of the West" from Independence, Mo. to Santa Fe, then a rural outpost belonging to Mexico, fleshing out the hardships and the beauty of the journey day by day. This compelling journal is a perfect accompaniment to Hampton Sides' chronicle, *Blood and Thunder*, which brings the larger picture of the times (manifest destiny, Kit Carson, and the treatment of the Navajo) back from obscurity.

This is a well written book about Susan S. Magoffin's travels and adventures along the Santa Fe. It is written from her own point of view as she thought and feared for herself, her new husband, and their friends in the trading caravan and the towns where they visited and they stopped and stayed. I recommend this book to others for further reading about the Santa Fe trail.

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A fascinating story by an articulate 19 year old. Descriptions of the terrain and scenery are realistic and poetic. I'm forever amazed at what travelers went through during the mid-1800s. Broken wagon tongues and axels were common and repair as was repairing them. Twenty-miles/day was a good day! Well worth reading for the story and the historic context.

Keeping a journal is very important....especially in the case of Susan Magoffin who left a math of

history that we would no longer know if she had not recorded facts in her journal on the historic Santa Fe Trail. She is a hero.

Good sorry about history

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