

Map of Villasur Route — 1720
 Drawn by A. B. Thomas

SPANISH INVASION OF 1720

Columbus or North Platte — Which Was the Site of Destruction of the Spanish Army?

An Assembly of Facts, Authorities, Arguments, Maps, Illustration, Bearing on Important Events in the History of the Platte Valley

(Prefatory Note)

Berkeley, Calif., July 22nd, 1925

Dear Dr. Sheldon:

I am sending you herewith my article and map on the Villasur expedition.

I must apologize for the long delay in forwarding this material to you. My teaching duties here proved heavier than I anticipated. The preparation of the article too, developed some problems, the magnitude of which I had not realized until I examined the Villasur material in relation to other sources bearing on similar expeditions. I found, as I believe will be seen from the paper, that a brief presentation of the latter was necessary to a consideration of the Villasur sources.

I am leaving for Europe about August 6th or 7th to work in the Archives of Seville and Paris for the coming year. I plan to examine early eighteenth century material bearing on the western Mississippi Valley area. There is every reason to believe that the Archives have valuable information on that interesting frontier, especially with regard to the Platte River. I regret my route east will not take me through Lincoln.

It has been a genuine pleasure to prepare this article and I sincerely appreciate your kindness in extending me the opportunity to present it in the pages of your Society's publication.

Sincerely,

A. B. THOMAS.

P.S.—When you write, will you please tell me what arrangements I can make for reprints? Thank you.

A. B. Thomas
2112 Durant Ave.,
Berkeley, California.

THE MASSACRE OF THE VILLASUR EXPEDITION AT THE FORKS OF THE PLATTE RIVER AUGUST 12, 1720 *

By A. B. THOMAS, University of California, Berkeley

In August of the summer of 1720, a band of Spaniards and Indian allies under the command of Pedro de Villasur, while searching for French intruders, were massacred almost to a man along the Platte River. This attack, which came with such suddenness on that quiet August morning, is one of the many stirring episodes which marked the Franco-Spanish border conflict in the heart of the continent in the early eighteenth century. The antecedents of the incident are found in the French occupation of the Mississippi Valley in the last years of the seventeenth and the early years of the eighteenth century. These activities of the French caused the Spanish authorities of Mexico to take steps to limit the French settlements to as small an area as possible. Between 1686 and 1689 the Spaniards sent expeditions into Texas under Alonzo de León to locate and expel the French led by La Salle. Then followed, first the temporary, and later the permanent occupation of eastern Texas by the establishment of a presidio and missions between the Neches and the Red Rivers. Spain's easternmost outpost then was Los Adaes, founded in 1717.¹

By this time the rumored and the actual advance of the French up the Missouri and the Platte, towards New Mexico, set in motion a similar process of Spanish expansion on that northern frontier. The expedition of Villasur and the proposal, at the same time, to establish a presidio and a mission at El Cuartelejo in eastern Colorado, are similar in all their purposes and supplementary to the expeditions of De León and the settlement at Los Adaes. The Texan establishments were designed to check the French advance by way of the Red River and the Caddo tribes; the Colorado (Cuartelejo) project was an attempt to protect another Spanish frontier, New Mexico, against the French advance up the Missouri and the Platte. The process in Colorado differs from that in Texas only in results, for the Cuartelejo plan was nipped in the bud by the massacre on the Platte River.

* This article has been written very largely from materials in Professor H. E. Bolton's Collection. For the liberal use of these materials, for his generous advice and criticism at every stage, the writer takes pleasure in acknowledging the heavy debt of gratitude he owes to Professor Bolton.

¹ Bolton, H. E., and Marshall, T. M., *The Colonization of North America*, 249-250.

Origin of the Villasur Expedition

For the authorities in Mexico the establishments in Texas were a source of information regarding the movements of the French in their expansion westward. About two years after the founding of the mission of Los Adaes, a frontier captain in Texas reported to the viceroy in Mexico City that a number of Frenchmen were marching to attack the mines of Santa Fe.² The viceroy thereupon despatched a letter to Antonio de Valverde, the Governor of New Mexico, ordering a reconnaissance.³ The governor accordingly held a junta de guerra on the 2nd of June, 1719, to discuss the expedition, but decided, however, to postpone the investigation until the following spring.⁴ The situation now suddenly took on a serious aspect. In July the viceroy received news from Spain that war had broken out with France in January. The government in New Spain was ordered to place the frontiers in shape to prevent a possible invasion.⁵

The actual approach of the French seemed to be confirmed by an expedition which the governor of New Mexico made in the fall of the same year, between September and November. On this expedition Valverde penetrated as far as the Arkansas River in pursuit of some Utes and Comanches who had been ravaging the New Mexico frontiers. While the expedition was encamped on the Arkansas, in the neighborhood of the present day Las Animas, the whole Indian settlement of El Cuartelejo came down to visit the commander. During the visit the governor's attention was drawn to a bullet wound carried by one of these Indians. On questioning him, Valverde learned that a party of Jumanos, Pawnees, and Frenchmen had attacked this Indian and others of his tribe, on their own land far beyond El Cuartelejo, apparently near the South Platte River.⁶ This new evidence of the French advance caused uneasiness.

On his return to Santa Fe Valverde sent a courier to Mexico carrying an account of his expedition.⁷ This courier seems to have arrived in Mexico City about the same time that a messenger arrived there from the Governor of Parral, a northern province of Mexico. This latter courier brought

² Autos de echas pr. el Brigadier Dn Pedro de Rivera en razon de la pesquisa contra dn Antto de Valverde, in Provincias Internas, tomo 37, expediente no. 1, f 13, archivo general de México. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

³ Twitchell, R. E., Spanish Archives of New Mexico, II, p. 189, no. 308.

⁴ Testimony of Valverde in Provincias Internas, tomo 37, expediente no. 1, f. 13. (Ms. Bolton Collection).

⁵ Duran to the Viceroy, January 30, 1719. Historia, tomo 394, no. 4. Archivo General de México. (Ms. Bolton Collection).

the startling and exaggerated news that some six thousand invading Frenchmen were seventy leagues or about one hundred and seventy-five miles from Santa Fe.⁸

On the 28th of December the fiscal of the Audiencia, who received from the viceroy the documents from Parral and New Mexico, turned them over to the Auditor General de Guerra. The fiscal pointed out that Valverde's report indicated that the French were not an immediate menace but that any advance on their part ought to be prevented. Accordingly, the Auditor, who accepted the suggestions, recommended to the council that, among other things, the Governor of New Mexico should establish at El Cuartelejo a presidio garrisoned with twenty or twenty-five men and accompanied by two missionary fathers, and at the same time strengthen the Spanish alliance with the Apaches in that region.⁹ At a council of war held in Mexico City on the 13th of January, 1720, the viceroy approved the Auditor's suggestions regarding the presidio at El Cuartelejo and again ordered the Governor of New Mexico to conduct a reconnaissance of the French position on that frontier, to secure details about their mode of living, numbers, and location,¹⁰ on the Rio Jesus Maria, where their establishments were reported to be.¹¹

From Santa Fe to El Cuartelejo

In June, 1720, Governor Valverde assembled a force in Santa Fe and placed it under the command of his Lieutenant-General, Don Pedro de Villasur. It is not clear just why Valverde himself did not lead the expedition, but it is known

⁶Diario y derrotero que cujio el Sr. General Dn. Antonio Balverde Cosio, Governor General de este Reyno y Governor provincias de la neuva Mexico en la campana que ejecuto las Naciones Yutas y Commanchos, 1719. (Ms. Bolton Collection).

⁷Dunn, W. E. Spanish Reaction Against the French Advance Toward New Mexico, in Mississippi Valley Historical Review, December, 1915, pp. 349-359. This article is an excellent and reliable interpretation of the Spanish sources bearing on Villasur's expedition, excepting the fragment of Villasur's diary which of course was not known to exist then.

⁸Manuel de San Juan de Santa Cruz to the Viceroy, December 11, 1719, Historia, Tomo 349, no. 11 Archivo General de México. (Ms. Bolton Collection.) A Spanish league is about 2.5 or 2.6 miles.

⁹Fiscal al Senor Auditor de la Guerra, Mexico City, December 28, 1719, Historia, tomo 394, nos. 12 and 13, Archivo General de México. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

¹⁰Viceroy to Valverde, January 13th, 1720, Historia, tomo 394, no. 19, Archivo General de México. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

¹¹Valverde to the Viceroy, November 30, 1719, Historia, tomo 394, no. 7, Archivo General de México. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

that on account of its tragic outcome he was later removed from office and brought to trial.¹²

The story of Villasur's march to the Platte opens on the 15th of June, 1720. On that day Valverde despatched to the viceroy a final statement bearing on the advisability of a presidio at La Jicarilla, a point somewhat closer to Santa Fe than El Cuartelejo, saying that Villasur was departing the next day to reconnoitre the French in the northeast.¹³ On the morning of the 16th, the expedition, well supplied for their long journey, set out from Santa Fe.

With Villasur were forty soldiers, some settlers or traders who had probably volunteered for trade or adventure, and seventy Indians. Villasur himself had been in New Mexico a number of years and had acted as Valverde's Lieutenant-Governor in 1719. However, there is some question as to his fitness for Indian scouting. With Villasur went an interesting Frenchman, Jean de l'Archeveque, who had been a member of Juan de Uribarri's expedition to El Cuartelejo in 1706, and who, almost twenty years still earlier, had had a hand in the assassination of La Salle. He had become a trader. Besides being the official interpreter, he took on the journey ten horses and six mules loaded with commodities to trade with the Indians. He probably assumed that his part in the murder of La Salle was of little risk to him. Chaplain Fray Juan Minguez was the ever-present priest. Joseph Naranjo led the Indian allies. In addition, there were others who were veterans of both Valverde's and Uribarri's expeditions into the Cuartelejo country.¹⁴

From Santa Fe the expedition traveled northeast to El Cuartelejo. The route to this spot was one very well known to the Spaniards, who had traveled it back and forth for almost three-quarters of a century, at least, before 1720. Briefly this route was north from Santa Fe to Taos. From Taos the expeditions proceeded east over the Culebra¹⁵ Range and then, at the foot of the eastern slopes, turned north to pass through

¹² Autos echas pr. el Brigadier Dn. Pedro de Rivera in *Provincias Internas*, Tomo 37, expediente no. 1, (Ms Bolton Collection.)

¹³ Valverde to the Viceroy, June 15, 1720, *Historia*, tomo 394, no. 28. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

¹⁴ Valverde to the Viceroy, October 8, 1720, *Historia*, tomo 394, nos. 29-35; The list of Spaniards and Indians killed as given by Captain D. Felix Martinez is 34 Spaniards and 11 Indians: Martinez to the Viceroy, *Historia*, tomo 394, no. 55 (Ms Bolton Collection.)

¹⁵ U. S. Land Map, 1918, Dept. of the Interior designates this range as the Culebra Range. The range as a whole is the Sangre de Christo. Possibly a more accurate designation would be the Taos Range.

the La Jicarilla Indian country of northeastern New Mexico, a movement which brought them to the headwaters of the Purgatoire River. From this river they proceeded north again through the Carlana Indian country, closely hugging the foothills of the Rockies until they came to the Arkansas or, as the Spaniards and Indians called it, the Rio Napestle. The expeditions arrived on the Napestle about in the neighborhood of present day Pueblo, crossed there and continued eastward to El Cuartelejo.

We are fortunate in the possession of the diaries of the commanders of at least two prominent expeditions which establish details, with regard to both geography and distance, of this well known route. Of the two, the earlier expedition is that of Juan de Uribarri, who went to El Cuartelejo in 1706.¹⁶ His line of march after leaving Taos was east eighteen leagues over the Culebra Range. This journey brought him to the junction of the Cimarron and Rayado Creeks. At this point he changed his route to due north for eighty leagues. The movement took him through the Jicarilla country, over the divide separating the headwaters of the Red and the Purgatoire Rivers, across the Purgatoire, and through the Carlana country to the banks of the Rio Napestle. Their arrival on the stream was probably at a point a little west of Pueblo of today. They had now traveled one hundred and twenty leagues from Santa Fe. Crossing the river here they journeyed in a general eastern direction to El Cuartelejo, where they pitched their camp in the knee of two small streams. The recorded distance of this journey eastward was but twenty-two leagues; but there is ground for assuming that their total distance was close to thirty leagues, or about eighty miles.

Thirteen years later, as noted above, the Governor of New Mexico set out from Santa Fe to punish some marauding Comanches and Utes. This expedition, which left on September 15, 1719, followed about the same route as that of Uribarri, and as a consequence Valverde mentions many of the prominent features noted by Uribarri, such as the Culebra Range, the Jicarilla Indians, the range between the Red and the Purgatoire, a stream evidently the Purgatoire, the Carlana Indians, and the Arkansas River. In a similar manner, the expedition found itself after a march of one hundred and nine

¹⁶Diario y derrotero que hizo el Sarg. lo mayor Juan de Ulibarri de la jornada que executo de orden del Sor Governor y Capitan General de este Rno Don Franzco Cuerdo y Valdes, in Provincias Internas, tomo 36, numo. 4, Archivo General de México. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

leagues from Santa Fe just south of the present Pueblo. Here Valverde swerved to the northeast and continued down the south side of the Arkansas for forty leagues, halting near Las Animas of the present day. At this point Valverde was visited by the whole settlement of El Cuartelejo Indians, who came down to pay their respects to him. The Indians had consumed four days' time in reaching the Arkansas. Since they were a thousand strong, men, women and children it took them this length of time to cover the distance which separated Valverde from the spot where Uribarri had come upon El Cuartelejo. Such a throng must have traveled very slowly, and the distance could not have been great.

This in brief was the general route followed by the Spaniards of New Mexico to the Colorado plains. With this in mind let us turn to a consideration of the material bearing on Villasur's route. We find almost immediately many things which establish that he too followed the usual route. The diaries, mentioned above, of Uribarri and Valverde not only do valuable service in giving us interesting details of the country through which the Spaniards passed on the way to El Cuartelejo, but in addition, they furnish strong reasons why Villasur went that way. Obviously, the first reason which suggests itself is that the route was the customary one. In the second place, we know from the sources for the three expeditions that Villasur had with him several of the same men who, like Naranjo and l'Archeveque, had accompanied both Uribarri and Valverde. Naranjo, especially, had acted as guide and scout for both Valverde and Uribarri, and we find him in this capacity under Villasur.¹⁷ But we are not wholly dependent on inference for several of the documents state that the Villasur expedition went northeast.¹⁸ that it passed through the Jicarilla and Carlana country,¹⁹ and finally, that, in the land of the Carlanas, it crossed the Rio Napestle on "balsas" (rafts).²⁰ Thus it seems clear that Villasur's route was the usual one to El Cuartelejo.

The Location of El Cuartelejo

El Cuartelejo is a spot which challenges interest. Not only was it, with Virginia, one of the points farthest north

¹⁷See below page 13 where Villasur states that Naranjo is ahead looking for the Pawnees.

¹⁸Testimony of Aguilar, Provincias Internas, Tomo 37, expediente no. 1, f. 16. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

¹⁹Bandelier, A. F., Expedition of Pedro de Villasur . . . in the year 1720, citing Auto of Felipe Tamariz in Autos sobre Comercio illicito con los Frances del Oriente y de la Louisiana. Papers of the Archaeological Institute of America, Series V, p. 191, note 2.

²⁰Ibid., p. 197, note 1. Bandelier cites both Aguilar and Tamariz.

to which Spanish influence penetrated before 1763, but its location for many years has been a subject of dispute and error. And inasmuch as the proper location of the spot is a decisive factor in determining the site of the battle on the Platte, it must be considered here. Since 1900 the location accorded El Cuartelejo has been in Scott County, Kansas, largely because of the unearthing there of an old adobe ruin which was forthwith claimed to be the outpost known to the Spaniards as El Cuartelejo.²¹ To this location the weight of the opinion of F. W. Hodge and other distinguished scholars has been given.²² However, the writer's attention was first directed by Professor Bolton to the fact that the Kansas location was too far east and that this outpost was well within the present bounds of Colorado. The short summary given below of the essential details of Uribarri's and Valverde's diaries and other supplementary material bearing on El Cuartelejo entirely confirms Dr. Bolton's opinion that El Cuartelejo was in eastern Colorado.

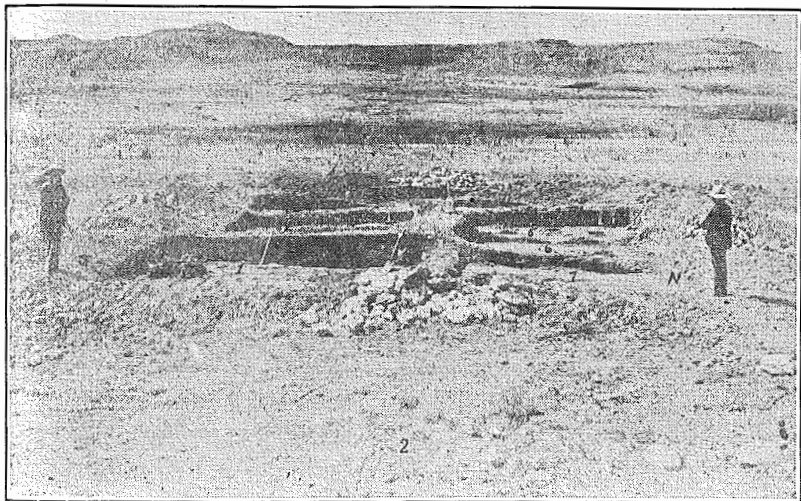
The diaries in this connection have a double value. They have enabled us to determine the route from Santa Fe to Cuartelejo. In the second place, owing to the carefully kept record of distance traveled each day, we are able to work out with a fair degree of accuracy how far El Cuartelejo was from Santa Fe.

In the case of Uribarri we noted his route was east eighteen leagues from Taos to the eastern foot of the Culebra Range. He followed these foothills of the Rockies north eighty leagues until he arrived on the Arkansas, a distance from Santa Fe of one hundred and twenty leagues. Crossing the Arkansas at about the present site of Pueblo, he continued east a recorded distance of twenty-two leagues. He gave no distance on two of the seven days consumed on this march. But on one of them he was lost; on the other he simply states that the expedition traveled "a short distance" and arrived at El Cuartelejo. One hundred and fifty leagues probably represents his total distance from Santa Fe to that point.

With regard to Valverde, he, too, traveled north along the foothills after crossing the range east of Taos. This northern march, also eighty leagues, found the expedition encamped a short distance south of present Pueblo. At this point Valverde swerved to the east and for forty leagues and marched down the south side of the Rio Napestle. His total recorded

²¹ Williston, S. W., and Martin, H. T., *Some Pueblo Ruins in Scott County, Kansas*. Kansas Historical Collections, Vol. 8, 1897-1900, pp. 126-127.

²² Hodge, F. W., *Handbook*, part 2, p. 337, article Cuartelejo.



Ruins of Old Pueblo Building in Scott County, Kansas, claimed to be El Cuartelejo. From Kansas Historical Society Collections, Vol. XI (1909-10), p. 409

distance was at the point at which he halted, near present Las Animas, one hundred and forty-nine leagues. And, it will be recalled, it was at this point that he awaited the arrival of the large body of Indians who came from El Cuartelejo to the opposite bank of the Arkansas. These Indians, men, women, and children, could have traveled but a short distance in the four days they consumed between El Cuartelejo and the Arkansas. This distance at the most was probably not more than thirty or thirty-five miles. If this distance is measured north from Valverde's position on the Arkansas, a point will be reached about where Uribarri came upon El Cuartelejo.

To recapitulate: Uribarri's total recorded distance was one hundred and forty-two leagues; Valverde's one hundred and forty-nine. In addition there is also an official report written in 1727 which states that El Cuartelejo was one hundred and sixty leagues from Santa Fe.²³ As has been suggested Uribarri probably traveled close to one hundred and fifty leagues. Both expeditions turned east about in the vicinity of present Pueblo. Uribarri, giving him the full benefit of the doubt, probably traveled thirty leagues east to El Cuartelejo. Valverde we have seen traveled forty leagues. In either case these distances represent but one-third of the

²³Bustamente to the Viceroy, April 30, 1727, Provincias Internas, tomo 37, expediente no. 1, f. 74. (Bolton Collection.)

total recorded distance to Pueblo, and if that short distance is measured off eastward from Pueblo a point will be reached which is but about half way to the eastern boundary of Colorado.

El Cuartelejo in Kiowa County, Colorado

To summarize, if one hundred and forty or one hundred and fifty leagues are measured off from Santa Fe along the route of Uribarri, El Cuartelejo will be found to be in western Kiowa county. And inasmuch as Uribarri spoke of a number of streams about the spot, and camped in the junction of two, the writer believes the location to be at the union of Mustang and Adobe Creeks.

From El Cuartelejo to the Platte River

When the expedition left El Cuartelejo to look for the French, it proceeded directly to the South Platte. This fact is established by a number of sources. The South Platte was well known to the Spaniards as the Rio Jesus Maria.²⁴ Documents state it to be fifty to seventy leagues from El Cuartelejo.²⁵ We know that on August 6th the expedition was on the Jesus Maria after a northeastward march of three hundred leagues from Santa Fe.²⁶ Soon after, on the 8th, the commander mentions the junction of the Rio Jesus Maria with another stream which he called the Rio San Lorenzo.²⁷ That junction must have been the forks of the Platte. An air line drawn northeast from Santa Fe to the forks of the North and South Platte cuts almost directly through El Cuartelejo, which is just about one-half way on such a line. This fits the sources, for El Cuartelejo was, as we have seen, about one hundred and fifty leagues from Santa Fe, while the junction was three hundred.

The possibility of another junction must be considered. The Loup, which forms a junction with the Rio Jesus Maria,

²⁴ Valverde to the Viceroy, October 8, 1720, Historia, tomo 394, no. 29, Archivo General de México. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

²⁵ Auto of Captain Felix Martinez gives fifty leagues: Historia tomo, 394, November 13, 1720, no. 38; Naranjo says seventy: See Bandler, Expedition of Villasur, page 185, note 2.

²⁶ Testimony of Aguilar, Provincias Internas, Tomo 37, Expediente no. 1, f. 6. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

²⁷ Sheldon, A. E., A New Chapter in Nebraska History, "Translation of a leaf from a journal in Spanish, found at the defeat of a detachment of that nation by the Otoptata." Nebraska History and Record of Pioneer Days, Vol. Vi. no. 1, January-March, 1923, pp. 13-19.

or rather the Platte, was adopted by Baron Marc de Villiers.²⁸ But that junction lacks the support of distance. El Cuartelejo was half way from Santa Fe to the junction, but from Santa Fe to the mouth of the Loup, the outpost would be only one-third of the way. It seems evident to the writer, therefore, that the command proceeded directly to the South Platte, Jesus Maria, and continued east along that stream searching for the reported French establishments, until the 6th of August, on which date they were within a short distance of the junction, after having traveled a total distance of three hundred leagues.

The Spaniards at the Forks of the Platte

We may now proceed with our story. The march from El Cuartelejo to the Jesus Maria had been fruitless; no sign of the French had been found. So Villasur, considering the great distance he had traveled, came to a halt on the 6th of August and decided to hold a junta de guerra to consider whether or not they should continue into the land of the Pawnee, on whose borders they now were. The decision was to cross the Jesus Maria and go on. Villasur himself can best state his movements at this time. ". . . Since one day did not suffice to transport everything our camp was divided that night by the river . . . Wednesday 7: At the break of day we crossed over the remainder of our baggage and people to the other side of the river of Jesus Maria. This was not without much trouble, but at last we found ourselves together at noon. Thursday 8: We leave the river Jesus Maria, following the trail of the Panane. . . We found, at a league from the river (Rio Jesus Maria) a large creek which it was necessary to cross and we thought from the water, which was very warm, that it was a branch of the river whose course was from west to east. We then marched over a plain, following always the trail of those who had gone before us. We saw a number of trees a league away and we met one of our savages who was of Captain Narran's (Naranjo) detachment and who had orders to wait for us to tell us to follow the creek and that he would follow the trail of those (the Pawnees) since they found no one in the villages. The camp arrived at the bank of the creek, and, as it was impossible to cross with our arms, we were obliged to keep along its bank and follow the same route as that taken by Captain Narrans. We had already traveled three

²⁸ Villiers, Le Baron Marc de, *Le Massacre de l'expedition espagnole du Missouri* (11 aout 1720). In *Journal de la Société des Americanistes de Paris*, Nouvelle Serie, Tome XIII, 1921, p. 249.

leagues to reach the creek; we marched three more to arrive at a plain." The meaning of this passage seems to be that after crossing the Rio Jesus Maria they came to the North Platte, or the San Lorenzo, but that they did not cross it on the eighth but continued to march along its bank for three leagues. On the next day, the 9th, they crossed the stream: "Friday 9. The camp being ready to march we saw, at more than a league's distance, someone approaching at a gallop. . . . We found that it was one of our people. . . . He told us that eight leagues distance, on the other side of the creek we were following, they had found the Panane in a bottom. . . . Upon this news the order was at once given to cross to the other side of the stream. It was carried out with so much good fortune that everything went over without getting wet, although the mules were up to their girths in the water. We marched three leagues along the creek and found it convenient to halt at five leagues distant from the tribe, according to the report of those who brought in the news."²⁹ Their camp was right at the junction of the two streams:". . . The general named the creek Saint Laurent (San Lorenzo). The river Jesus Maria unites with this creek where we are; so large is the stream there that if we had not crossed before, it would be impossible to do so."³⁰ Without doubt the Saint Laurent, or San Lorenzo, was the North Platte.

As soon as Villasur had come to a halt he sent his Pawnee interpreter to his kinsmen to assure them of the Spaniards' friendship and good will. The interpreter left about eleven o'clock in the morning and came flying back at six in the evening to report that the Indians he found had threatened him with hatchets. Their villages he said were on the other side, that is south, of the river.

The Meeting with the Pawnee

The Spaniards on the following morning marched toward this village and came to a halt opposite the Pawnees. They signalled the Indians, who answered them. According to the Spaniards' interpreter, the Pawnees said that they did not wish to join the Spaniards but that they wanted their interpreter to cross and talk with them. The interpreter surprised the Spaniards by his willingness to go in spite of his fear of the day before. Before he left, Villasur instructed him and gave him presents to distribute among the chiefs.

²⁹ Sheldon, A. E., *A New Chapter in Nebraska History*, p. 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

This incident occurred on the 10th of August, and here the fragment of the diary ends.³¹

Other Spanish documents, however, take up the story at this point. According to the testimony of a survivor, Idelfonso Rael de Aguilar, Villasur gave the Pawnee interpreter knives and bundles of tobacco. The interpreter did not return, but another Pawnee came over whom the Spaniards were unable to understand. The Spaniards asked their own interpreter, who appeared the next day on the bank opposite, why he did not return and if there were among them any other "Spaniards" (French, of course, for the Indians called all who were white, "Spaniards"). He replied that he did not know of other "Spaniards" and that the Pawnees would not let him return. To consider the matter, Villasur called a council of war. He and others wished to cross the river and get the information that was not forthcoming. A majority of the council, however, opposed the move on the ground that it was dangerous and that the Pawnees had already given proof of their bad faith by holding the interpreter.³²

Another account gives a different version of the interview. This is Valverde's report of the defeat which he sent to the viceroy. Valverde apparently based his information on the tales of the survivors.³³ Some Pawnees, he wrote, came across the river to visit the Spaniards. These said that among them were some "Spaniards." On hearing that the Lieutenant General immediately ordered l'Archeveque to write a letter in French. Their Pawnee interpreter carried this to his kinsmen across the river and returned shortly with a reply and accompanied by another Indian who carried into the Spanish camp a French (Breton) flag. The reply was written on some old paper and was wholly unintelligible to either l'Archeveque or the Spaniards. The commander thinking that the French were handicapped by the lack of writing materials, sent back paper, ink and a quill. At the same time he sent another letter in Spanish.

The Retreat to the North Platte

For two days the Spaniards awaited a reply,³⁴ but none was forthcoming. The delay filled them with apprehension and fearing treachery of some sort, they decided to retreat

³¹ Sheldon, A. E., *A New Chapter in Nebraska History*, pp. 17-19.

³² Testimony of Aguilar, *Provincias Internas*, Tomo 37, expediente no. 1, f. 6. (Ms. Bolton Collection.)

³³ Valverde to the Viceroy, October 8, 1720, *Historia*, tomo 394, nos. 29-35; Testimony of Valverde, *Provincias Internas*, tomo 37, expediente no. 1, f. 4. (Ms. Bolton Collection.)

³⁴ Testimony of Aguilar, *Provincias Internas*, tomo 37, expediente no. 1, f. 6. (Ms. Bolton Collection.)

on the 11th. Returning the same distance³⁵ to the San Lorenzo they recrossed, doubtless at the same ford they had found two days before.³⁶ On the south bank of this stream, the North Platte, they cleared a space in the tall grass and pitched camp about four o'clock in the afternoon. When night came Villasur charged his sentinels with caution, though he felt safe after their long retreat. The night was spent in perfect quiet except that shortly after nightfall the slumber of the camp was disturbed by the loud barking of a dog. The dog was aroused apparently by a band of Pawnees moving cautiously along the banks of the river near the camp. The commander did nothing more, however, than to caution his guards to redouble their vigilance.

The Massacre on the North Platte

The break of dawn found the Spaniards astir making ready to continue their move southward. Suddenly in the confusion of breaking camp the party was swept by a murderous fire of shot and arrows. The stampeding horses threw the camp into further panic and before Villasur could organize a defense he was slain. The priest was shot down where he stood, and l'Archeveque went to join La Salle. Those who could flee did so, but when the smoke cleared forty-five Spaniards and Indians lay dead in the grass.

The arrival of the survivors in New Mexico threw the whole province into alarm. Valverde shared in the general fear and urged upon the viceroy the necessity of a garrison at La Jicarilla. However, talk, investigation and attempts to locate the site of the massacre followed with no move to take the protecting step. But all danger from further French aggression was removed by a treaty signed by France and Spain on March 27th, 1721. Until the acquisition of the Louisiana territory in 1763, this expedition marks the high tide of Spanish expansion northeast of Santa Fe.

North Platte, the Location of the Villasur Massacre

The exact location of the massacre of the Villasur command can now be determined with a considerable degree of accuracy. We have seen that on the 6th of August the Spaniards had traveled three hundred leagues and were somewhat west of the Rio Jesus Maria, or the South Platte. They spent the 6th and until noon of the 7th in crossing this stream. On the 8th they left the stream and came to the San Lorenzo,

³⁵Testimony of Valverde, Provincias Internas, tomo 37, expediente no. 1, f. 4. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

³⁶Ibid., f. 4 also Testimony of Aguilar, Provincias Internas, tomo 37, expediente no. 1, f. 6. (Ms Bolton Collection.)

a league's distance away, or possibly three leagues, and had continued along it three leagues into a plain. On the 9th they received news that the Pawnees were eight leagues ahead on the other side of the stream. Villasur crossed, marched three leagues and went into camp at the junction. On the 10th they marched five leagues until they were opposite the Pawnees, communicated with them, became suspicious and retreated eight leagues on the 11th. Aguilar tells us that they recrossed the San Lorenzo, or the North Platte, at four o'clock in the afternoon and made camp. On the following morning, the 12th, the massacre occurred.

Inasmuch as they retreated over the ground they had come two days before, it is highly probable that they recrossed the San Lorenzo where they had found a ford the first time. Since we know this crossing was three leagues, about seven miles, from the junction, the massacre occurred either just west of, or on the present site of the town of North Platte.

In conclusion a few general comments suggest themselves. It is patent that the determination of the site of the massacre depends wholly upon the location of El Cuartelejo, since it is known that the expedition passed through that spot and that it reached the Rio Jesus Maria. If the Kansas location were to be accepted then a northeast march from the spot might bring the expedition to a point on the Platte River near its junction with the Loup. As mentioned above, Baron Marc de Villiers, who discovered the fragment of Villasur's diary in the Archives of Paris and whose interpretation of it has been very ably translated, edited and published in a recent number of this magazine by Professor A. E. Sheldon, adopted the junction with the Loup as the site. But there are two facts which make impossible such a site. In the first place, the detailed records of the relations which the Spaniards had with El Cuartelejo all indicate that the spot was well within the present state of Colorado, and that it was, as the Spaniards traveled, approximately one hundred and fifty leagues from Santa Fe. The forks of the Platte we have seen were three hundred leagues from Santa Fe. With this in mind, if an arc whose center is at El Cuartelejo is circumscribed to cut through Santa Fe, it will also cut through the junction of the North and South Platte but will only reach about half way to the Loup and the Platte. It follows, therefore, that the Loup is a third too far from Santa Fe and almost twice too far from El Cuartelejo to agree with the sources outlined above.