

Trist, negotiator for the U.S. in the War of 1847

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TRIST was a unique person. According to diplomatic records of the time his conduct while fulfilling his mission was rather peculiar, yet, what seems even more odd is that not very much research has been done about him. There are occasional articles in professional history journals and brief remarks in books written about the conflict, but what remains to be done is a biography with full details about his trip to Mexico, his stance during the Peace Talks, and other aspects of his life.

What comes to mind, then, is this question: What makes Trist so unique? Here is a brief recapitulation of history. Trist, after several months of fruitless negotiation, was ordered to suspend all discussions and return to Washington as soon as possible! The reason was

Nicholas Trist, from Charlottesville, Virginia, was sent by President Polk as a Special Envoy to the Mexico-U.S. Peace Talks after the War of 1847, and was promptly forgotten by history.

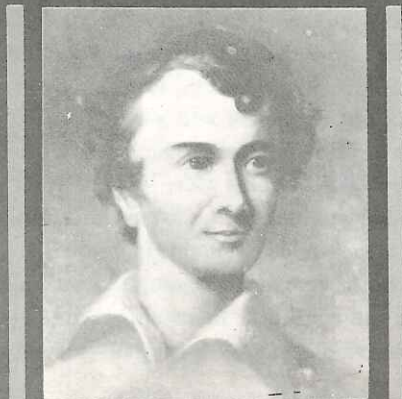
that the United States had determined not to continue negotiating on the original premises. They wanted more territory from Mexico since the war had continued to generate increasingly large expenditures and loss of life, and as a result the Americans wanted more territory.

Polk wanted the border between the two nations moved much farther south than initially requested. Regardless of how incredible it may seem, Trist considered Polk's request for a few days and then decided to stay in Mexico. He was influenced by two factors: first, the injustice of the war, and second, the uncertain prospects for ratification by the Mexican Congress. Trist felt that the war epitomized "abuse of power" by the United States. It would have been difficult to get the Mexican Congress to accept losing a large part of its territory, even without Polk's expansion of the area originally agreed upon. The more Mexico was penalized, the harder it would be to ratify the Treaty.

Documenting the events is easy: President Polk recorded the facts in his journal. If Nicholas Trist had followed orders and returned to Washington when he was told to, Mexico would have lost significantly more land than the vast region in the North. What Polk had wanted was to add the area east of the Sierra Madre mountains. This would have meant giving the United States what are today the States of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Veracruz and

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DEBER Y CONCIENCIA
Nicolás Trist,
el negociador norteamericano
en la guerra del 47



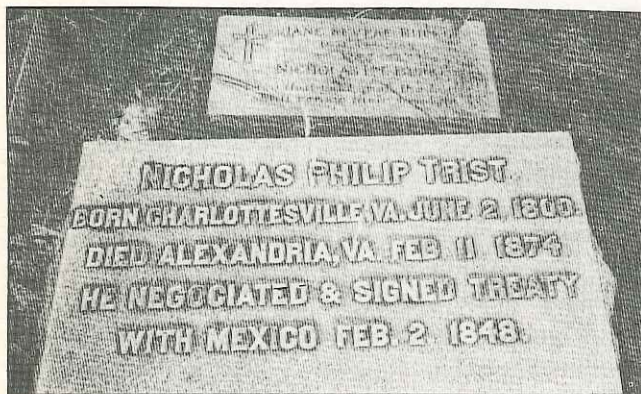
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Tabasco. This means that Mexico would have lost an area of abundant oil resources as well as most of the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

It is evident that we cannot discard the speculation of those who espouse the "All of Mexico" theory. The idea of annexing the entire country to the U.S. was not farfetched. Several newspapers supported it, among them the *Boston Times*, the *New York Sun*, the *New York Herald*, the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and the *Baltimore Sun*.

Powerful politicians were also furthering the cause. The list includes Senators from Texas (Thomas Jefferson Rusk), Indiana (Edward Hannegan), New York (Daniel Dickinson) and Michigan (Lewis Cass). These legislators were influential people of their time, and their opinions carried a lot of weight in Washington and the entire country. Senator Cass, a Democrat, even ran for President in 1848 but lost. His opponent was the popular General Zachary Taylor, who won the war against Mexico.

It is difficult to understand how Nicholas Trist has escaped the attention he deserves in Mexican history during all these years, when Mexico owes to him its having kept many square miles of her territory. It is also strange that historians in the United States have not chosen to write about his life. The Mexican episode is but one among many engaging aspects of his life, all of which make interesting material for research.



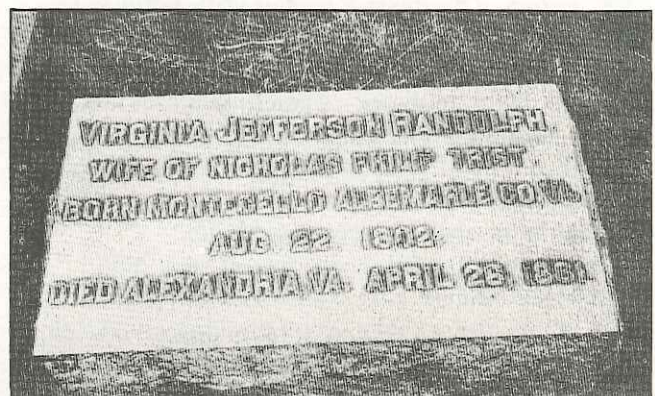
Nicholas Trist's grave in Ivy Hill cemetery.

Trist lived in Monticello. He studied law under Jefferson, and worked as an Assistant Secretary to President Andrew Jackson. Following this assignment, he was appointed Consul in Cuba, where he made his first mark as an independent thinker with respect for the law. Trist had serious confrontations with shipowners and captains from the United States. The problem was carried as far as the U.S. Congress, which decided against his accusers. The Congressional decision used these words: The evidence did not affect "Mr. Trist's integrity and honor" in any way whatsoever.

There is no question that the stance taken by Trist in Mexico is the most outstanding chapter in his life. His

colleagues, particularly three peers who represented Mexico at the negotiating table, held him in high esteem¹. They recognized that it was his "admirable integrity" and "lofty ideals" that made peace possible.

Logic supports the suggestion that his disobedience brought down on him grave consequences in Washington. Trist not only lost his job with the State Department, but was denied payment for his expenses in Mexico. It would not be until many years later, during the administration of Ulysses Grant, that, weary and fatigued from economic problems and age, Trist decided to present his claim to the U.S. Senate. The institution decided in his favor and ordered the payments made.



Virginia Jefferson Trist's grave in Ivy Hill cemetery.

It was during this period that Trist was appointed Postmaster of Alexandria, Virginia, where he died in 1874. Unfairly forgotten, he rests in peace under a modest tomb in Ivy Hill Cemetery. My book, *Deber y Conciencia, Nicolás Trist, El Negociador Norteamericano en la Guerra del 47*², recently published by Editorial Diana in Mexico, attempts to ameliorate this disregard.

Years of research in libraries in the United States, Mexico and Havana, went into this book. The best source of information were the letters Trist wrote. It was here that I discovered fascinating information about Trist's impressions of Jefferson, Jackson, Winfield Scott, Polk and other celebrities of his era, as well as vivid descriptions of his sojourn in Mexico and Cuba. The letters from family members, especially from his wife, Virginia Jefferson Randolph, granddaughter of the "Wise man from Monticello", also provided valuable information.

Nothing would give me more satisfaction than knowing that my work will contribute to rescuing a unique man, to whom all of Mexico is indebted, from oblivion. **M**

¹ The three most important Mexican negotiators for the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo were: José Bernardo Cuoto, Luis G. Cuevas and Miguel Atristain.

² Duty and Conscience. Nicholas Trist, Negotiator for the United States in the War of 1847.