

New Mexico library has Billy the Kid letters

August 5 2009, By DEBORAH BAKER , Associated Press Writer



This undated ferrotype picture provided by the Lincoln County, N.M., Heritage Trust Archive is believed to depict William Bonney, also known as Billy the Kid, circa 1880. In a boon to history lovers and Billy the Kid buffs, a March 1881 letter and an earlier letter to then governor Lew Wallace from New Mexico's most famous outlaw are now in a state history library here and available for public viewing at Fray Angelico Chavez History Library in Santa Fe, N.M. The letters have been out of the public eye for a couple of decades. Acquired by the now-defunct Lincoln County Heritage Trust, they then belonged in turn to the Hubbard Museum in Ruidoso and the Lincoln State Monument. (AP Photo/Lincoln County Heritage Trust Archive)

(AP) -- The handwritten letter to the governor is polite, articulate and to the point. "Dear Sir," begins the missive. "I wish you would come down to the jail and see me."

The sender of the letter to territorial governor Lew Wallace was none other than Billy the Kid, the legendary gunslinger who was being held in the Santa Fe jail at the time. Just four months later, the Kid was gunned down by Sheriff Pat Garrett.

But in a boon to [history](#) lovers and Billy the Kid buffs, that March 1881 letter and an earlier letter to the governor from New Mexico's most famous outlaw are now in a state history library in Santa Fe and available for public viewing.

Bob McCubbin of Santa Fe, president of the Wild West History Association, said the letters are an absolute treasure.

"Anybody that has any interest in Billy the Kid would be thrilled to see a letter that he actually wrote," McCubbin said.

The letters have been out of the public eye for some years.

They belonged to the Wallace family for a number of years before being passed on to various historical organizations. It was recently decided that the most appropriate venue for them was the Fray Angelico Chavez History Library in Santa Fe.

A thug to some, a folk hero to others, Billy the Kid has been permanently embedded in America's pop culture through a seemingly endless stream of books, articles and films.

"It is fascinating to me that a kid of 21 is still so much in our folklore," librarian Tomas Jaehn said recently as he pored over the letters, in good

condition and kept in plastic sleeves.

The letters, in black ink, are signed with the name of William H. Bonney, one of the aliases used by the Kid, who was born Henry McCarty - perhaps in New York City around 1859, although it's not certain.

They were written in the aftermath of the so-called Lincoln County war, a bloody, five-month feud in 1878 between mercantile interests in the southern New Mexico village of Lincoln. The Kid, a ranch hand, was aligned with one of the factions.

In the first letter, undated but believed to have been written in March 1879, the Kid tells Wallace he was a witness to a murder the previous month that had shattered the peace in the county.

He says he will testify in court if he's protected from his enemies, and indictments against him stemming from the Lincoln County War are annulled.

Gale Cooper, author of a 2008 historical novel about Billy the Kid called "Joy of the Birds," says it demonstrates his cockiness and nerve.

"Here he is a homeless drifter, telling the governor he's going to make a deal," said Cooper.

After the governor and the young outlaw met a few days later, there was a carefully arranged, staged arrest and the Kid testified. But no pardon ever materialized.

That's what the Kid wanted to talk to Wallace about when he wrote the second letter, in March 1881.

He was in the Santa Fe jail at the time, facing trial for the murder of Sheriff William Brady during the Lincoln County War and increasingly desperate for a pardon. He would shortly be convicted and sentenced to hang - although his famous jail escape in Lincoln County would save his neck for a time.

The handwriting in the two letters appears different. In the earlier letter, it's more slanted and flowing and formal - the Spencerian penmanship popular at the time. In the second letter, it's more constrained.

"They know he was literate. They know he could write well. But they haven't figured out quite yet why some of the handwritings are so different," said Jaehn, the librarian.

McCubbin suggests he could have dictated the jail letter, which he said would make it no less authentic - it's "expressing what the Kid wanted to express," he said. He said further examination should be done.

Cooper, who did extensive research for her novel, is convinced the handwriting is different because when the Kid wrote the letter from jail, he was in handcuffs. In another [letter](#) from the jail, to a lawyer, he apologized for his bad writing, saying he was shackled.

On the Net:

Billy the Kid web site: <http://www.newmexico.org/billythekid>

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Citation: New Mexico library has Billy the Kid letters (2009, August 5) retrieved 24 April 2026 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-08-mexico-library-billy-kid-letters.html>

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