

FIRST DRAFT

Warning ignored, near disaster in mountains, war drums continue

After passing through the Grand Valley in the autumn of 1857, the military command led by Captain R.B. Marcy continued south. By Dec. 8, it had reached the confluence of the Gunnison and Uncompahgre rivers.

Here, they were warned by Ute Indians to spend the winter. Continuing south to New Mexico was too dangerous, the Utes said. But Marcy and his troops ignored them, and barely survived the mountain trek.

The troops had been sent from Fort Bridger, in the southwest corner of today's Wyoming, to Fort Union in New Mexico, assigned to obtain food and other supplies for Gen. Albert Sydney Johnston and his Army forces spending the winter at Fort Bridger.

The Army was preparing for war with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints over control of Utah Territory.

The so-called Utah War appeared a near certainty after President James Buchanan sent Gen. Johnston and his troops toward Utah.

One Mormon historian called the resulting events "a costly, disruptive and unnecessary confrontation" and "a year-long comedy of errors" that escalated when Buchanan named a non-Mormon to replace Brigham Young as governor of Utah Territory.

"Had there been transcontinental telegraphic communications at the time, what has been referred to as 'Buchanan's Blunder' almost certainly would not have occurred," wrote Richard D. Poll.

Both sides made belligerent statements that encouraged a potential confrontation. As Johnston's army was on the march, in September 1857, Young issued a proclamation of martial law in Utah and declared that no U.S. Army forces would be allowed into the territory.

Capt. Marcy viewed the Mormons as hard-working, industrious people. But in his memoir, he disputed the complaints raised by Brigham Young and other church leaders.

Utah, he said, "had been more favored" by the U.S. government "than any other Territory."

In early December, Marcy and his party of 40 soldiers and 25 civilians camped near the remnants of Antoine Robidoux's Fort Uncompahgre, northwest of today's Delta, Colorado.

Nearby, they met a group of Ute Indians, who tried to dissuade them from continuing south.

Marcy asked the unnamed chief of the Ute band to accompany his party through the mountains.

But the chief refused, "saying that he was not yet ready to die," Marcy reported. Unless the soldiers turned back or spent the winter in the Uncompahgre Valley, "we would all inevitably perish," the chief told Marcy.

But he and his men ignored the warning and pushed on, up the Gunnison River, past the Black Canyon, then turned south toward Cochetopa Pass in what's now



A drawing from Harper's magazine in 1858 shows Gen. Johnston's Army, the Utah Expedition, crossing the plains en route to Utah.



HARPER'S MAGAZINE ILLUSTRATION FROM LIBRARY OF CONGRESS Interior of an officer's tent as part of the Utah Expedition, with a Native American peeking in from the right.



Gen. Johnston, here referred to as Col. Johnston, was the commander of the Utah Expedition in 1857-58.

HARPER'S MAGAZINE ILLUSTRATION FROM LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Saquache County. "We had proceeded but a few miles when the snow began very seriously to impede our progress," Marcy wrote. "On the second day, it became still deeper," and Marcy ordered the men to take turns breaking trail for the pack animals.

Packs were lightened. All goods but a single blanket per man and a small amount of bread were left behind. Still, animals laid down and died.

Within a few days, they found the snow 5 feet deep, and the men breaking trail were forced to crawl on hands and knees.

"This method packed the snow so that, after a few men had passed, it ... was sufficiently firm to sustain the mules after all the men had traversed it."

On Jan. 1, 1858, it took the party all day to cover about two miles this way, with some of the men nearly barefoot and suffering from frostbite.

"Yet every soldier, without a single exception, has performed everything I required of him, cheerfully and manfully," Marcy said.

To make matters worse, mountain-man guide Jim Baker was lost. Fortunately, one evening, a civilian in the party named Miguel Alona approached Marcy and pointed to a gap in the mountains some 30 miles away, to the south of the direction they were traveling, and said that was Cochetopa

Pass. Marcy offered Alona extra money to guide his party over the pass but threatened to hang him if he was wrong.

Alona reluctantly accepted. Ten days later they reached the summit of Cochetopa and looked down on the San Luis Valley. Marcy sent Alona and another man ahead to Fort Massachusetts, near the New Mexico border.

Eleven days later, when Marcy and his troops had finally reached the San Luis Valley, the men sent ahead returned with fresh horses and food. Three wagons with more supplies were just behind them.

Four days later, Marcy and the entire party straggled into Fort Massachusetts, 51 days after having left Fort Bridger. They had been assured the trip would only take 25 days.

Marcy lost only one man in his command, a soldier who gorged himself when he reached Fort Massachusetts and died the next day.

Marcy and his troops moved on to Taos, New Mexico, and from there to Fort Union, southeast of Santa Fe.

He gathered wagons filled with supplies for Fort Bridger and more than 100 soldiers. They headed out March 20 and traveled north along the Front Range of the Rockies, then over South Pass in Wyoming and southwest to Fort Bridger.

By the time he arrived

in mid-June, the threat of war between the United States and the Mormons had largely evaporated.

April had marked the arrival in Salt Lake City of Thomas Kane, who had long been a friend of the Mormons, and Alfred Cumming of Georgia, who had been appointed to replace Young as Utah governor.

Kane persuaded Young and other Mormon leaders to accept Cumming in the post.

In June, two peace commissioners appointed by Buchanan arrived in Salt Lake, carrying an amnesty proclamation for the Mormons. They would be forgiven for past offenses if they accepted Cumming's authority and allowed the Army to establish a garrison in Utah Territory.

Johnston's army, Marcy included, marched through nearly deserted Salt Lake City on June 26 and the Utah War was over. Soon, the Army built Camp Floyd, 40 miles southwest of Salt Lake.

As Marcy was heading north to Fort Bridger, another military unit under the leadership of Col. W.W. Loring began building a wagon road from Fort Union to Salt Lake City.

Once spring arrived, the new road roughly followed the trail Marcy's unit had trudged across months earlier — over Cochetopa Pass to the Gunnison and Uncompahgre rivers, then north to the Grand Valley. But there it turned west into Utah, then northwest to the Salt Lake Valley.

It was constructed in 1858, and was the primary supply line for Camp Floyd for its three years of operation. Remnants of the wheel ruts created by the Army wagons are still visible between Whitewater and Delta.

Marcy went on to be a brevet general for the Union Army during the Civil War.

His former commander, Gen. Albert Sydney Johnston, became a general in the Confederate Army and was killed at the Battle of Shiloh in 1862.

Although he was no longer governor of Utah Territory, Brigham Young continued as president of the LDS church until his death in 1877.

Sources: "Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border," by Randolph Barnes Marcy; "The Utah War," by Richard D. Poll, <https://historytogo.utah.gov/utah-war>; Utah Digital Newspapers at <https://digitale newspapers.org>.

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2022 THIS WEEK IN THE LEGISLATURE

DENVER — An oft-delayed bill to help support local media is to be heard in a House committee this week. The measure, HB1121, is designed to bring some financial support to local newspapers. Under it, all state agencies that use taxpayer dollars in marketing campaigns must spend at least 50% of that money advertising in local newspapers. The measure also offers a 50% income tax credit on contributions made to nonprofit news outlets.

■ **Today:** The House Finance Committee is to hear HB1001, a measure to reduce business filing fees.

■ **Tuesday:** The Senate State, Veterans and Military Affairs Committee is to discuss SB133, a measure that would call on the Colorado State Patrol to provide security for members of the Legislature and statewide elected officials under certain circumstances.

■ **Wednesday:** The House Energy and Environment Committee is to hear HB1140, a measure that would allow

hydrogen to be considered a renewable energy source.

■ **Thursday:** The House State, Civic, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee is to debate a proposed ballot measure to extend the state's homestead property tax exemption to include gold star spouses, parents who have lost a child who died in the line of duty in the military.

■ **Next week:** A Senate committee is to consider a bill that would make Juneteenth an official state holiday, to be celebrated on June 19 starting this year.

■ All floor action and committees can be watched or heard on the Colorado Legislature's website at leg.colorado.gov.

Check that website to see which measures are available for remote testimony, and how to register to speak.

Local lawmakers can be contacted at janice.rich.house@state.co.us, ray.scott.senate@state.co.us and matthew.soper.house@state.co.us.

— Charles Ashby

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