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Philip St. George Cooke: On the Vanguard of Western Expansion with the U.S. Army, 1827-1848

Jeffrey V. Pearson

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PHILIP ST. GEORGE COOKE: ON THE VANGUARD OF WESTERN EXPANSION WITH THE U.S. ARMY, 1827-1848

by

JEFFREY V. PEARSON

B.A., History, Indiana University-Bloomington, 1998
M.A., History, University of New Mexico, 2001

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctorate of Philosophy
in History

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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ABSTRACT

During the first two decades of his remarkable forty-six years of military service, from 1827 to 1848, Philip St. George Cooke literally crossed the continent as a member of the United States Army and contributed significantly to the establishment of the nation as a continental empire. Initially as a member of the Sixth Infantry, and more prominently as an officer in the elite First Regiment of United States Dragoons, Cooke participated in the vital missions conducted by the frontier army to secure the nation’s claims to its western territories. He explored the frontier, gathered information on its resources and inhabitants, built roads and military posts, policed settlements and Indian societies, and guarded the country’s western borders. In the process, Cooke aided the army’s efforts to establish foundations for western infrastructure; improved lines of travel, communication, and commerce; implemented and enforced government policies throughout the region; and ensured peace along the nation’s western borders. By showcasing Cooke’s participation in these and other missions, this dissertation demonstrates the importance of the frontier army to the spread of American sovereignty over the trans-Mississippi West. Most importantly, however, the dissertation uses Cooke’s early career to counter the popular notion that the army’s primary function on the frontier was to combat native resistance to western expansion. Instead, it highlights the frontier army as an institution that performed public works on behalf of the American people.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Foundations.................................................................1
Chapter Two: The First Regiment of U.S. Dragoons.................................42
Chapter Three: Escort Duty on the Santa Fe Trail..................................74
Chapter Four: The Platte River Expedition.........................................110
Chapter Five: The South Pass Expedition.........................................149
Chapter Six: “In This Field of War’s Drudgery”.......................................206
Chapter Seven: “History May Be Searched in Vain”.................................237
Chapter Eight: Controversy in Occupied California...............................292
Conclusion and Aftermath.....................................................................327
Bibliography.........................................................................................343
On May 4, 1829, nineteen year old Second Lieutenant Philip St. George Cooke stood on the gunwale of a flat boat contemplating his final mission as an officer in the United States Army. He had graduated from West Point two years earlier, and like so many young officers who had completed the terms of their first enlistment, Cooke had decided to resign his commission in order to “seek a more stirring and exciting profession.” Before he submitted his resignation, however, he wanted to take to the field and experience the frontier. His company had been assigned to escort a caravan of traders down the Santa Fe Trail, and the lieutenant did not believe it would be honorable to tender his resignation before the mission was completed. Furthermore, since graduating from the academy, Cooke had entertained dreams of adventure in the far West and the escort would undoubtedly provide the drama he hoped to experience before returning to civilian life.

Suddenly, as the flat boat approached the steamer that would carry him and the other members of the escort from Jefferson Barracks to Cantonment Leavenworth, Cooke heard the faint sound of metal sliding across metal followed by a splash in the river below him. Turning toward the water, he saw the fading glimmer of his sword’s scabbard disappearing into the murky depths of the Mississippi River. Inexplicably it had detached from his belt, slid down the blade, and left Cooke standing on the deck with sword in hand. Whereas most would have viewed the incident as the unfortunate loss of a valuable piece of equipment, Cooke saw it as a sign of his destiny. As he looked at the sword clutched in his hand, all thought of resigning his
commission faded from his mind. The young officer decided his destiny rested in service to the
United States Army and the Republic.¹

For those familiar with the nineteen year old Cooke, the decision he made that day on the
Mississippi was undoubtedly a surprise. Prior to that moment he had demonstrated no interests
in a career as a professional soldier. In fact, his presence in the army was more the result of
unfortunate circumstances that had befallen his family following the death of his father a decade
earlier than a reflection of the young man’s martial ambitions. In 1823, at the age of fourteen,
Philip had accepted an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point. This
was more of a way to satisfy his widowed mother’s desire to see him educated than from any
personal desire to become a soldier.

Cooke, however, was a born romantic. Since childhood, he had read histories and novels
that told of the daring exploits of heroes real and imagined, and as a cadet, he became enamored
with the esprit de corps of military life. Furthermore, during his two years on active duty, the
camaraderie he experienced serving alongside veteran officers of frontier service combined with
the tales they told of distant outposts and encounters with Indians excited his desires for
adventure. Although Cooke well knew the life of a soldier could be filled with the dull repetition
of duties, suffocating discipline, and painfully slow rates of promotion, it was also a life that
offered experiences that were as thrilling and romantic as any published by the most skilled
chroniclers of history or writers of fiction.

Born in Leesburg, Virginia on June 13, 1809 to Dr. Stephen and Catherine Cooke,
Philip—or St. George as he was called by family members—began life as the son of a
prosperous physician and landowner, and a gentle woman of British heritage. His parents had
met during the American Revolution while Stephen, a surgeon in the fledgling U.S. Navy, was
being held as a prisoner of war on the island colony of Bermuda following the capture of his ship in late 1776. Although a prisoner, Stephen’s status as an officer and physician afforded him considerable liberties on the island, and during his five years of captivity, he struck up a friendship with John Esten, a former governor and the colony’s Chief Justice. The catalyst of their friendship is unclear, but Esten was a devout Whig and it is not impossible to imagine that he sympathized with the struggle undertaken by the American colonists. Regardless of circumstances, Stephen became a frequent guest at Esten’s home in St. George. What is equally certain is that Stephen became smitten with Esten’s teenage daughter, Catherine. Paroled in 1781, Stephen briefly returned to the United States, but his love for Esten’s daughter was such that a year later he returned to Bermuda and married the sixteen-year-old Catherine.

In 1783, the couple left Catherine’s home in Bermuda and sailed for Boston. Stephen resumed his medical practice, but also increased his fortunes through a series of successful shipping investments. In 1789, Dr. Cooke moved his family, which included three children, to Alexandria, Virginia. By the mid-1790s, Stephen stopped practicing medicine and relocated his family to Loudoun County in the interior of the state. His agricultural pursuits provided a comfortable life for his growing brood as well as membership in the local gentry. Surviving evidence indicates that the Cookes were a happy couple and produced several children during the course of their marriage. Philip, in all probability, was the youngest son and among the last of the couple’s offspring. While few intimate details are known of the family’s daily life, it is certain that Stephen and Catherine placed great importance on their children’s education. All their children received an education in accordance with the customs of the day, and their eldest sons, John Esten (1783-1853) and John Rogers (1788-1854) were also provided university educations that ultimately led to successful careers in medicine and law, respectively.²
In 1816, however, Stephen died unexpectedly and the loss initiated a gradual financial decline for the family. Within a few years, Catherine was forced to sell most of the family’s assets—including nineteen slaves—to pay her husband’s creditors. By 1821, continued hardships compelled the widow to withdraw Philip from the Academy of Martinsburg where he had demonstrated great aptitude as a student. Catherine, however, was determined to secure an education for her youngest son, and with the support of several prominent members of Loudoun County society, she launched a campaign to win her son an appointment to the United States Military Academy. In the spring of 1823, Philip received a conditional appointment signed by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun.3

Under normal circumstances sending her son to West Point was an option Catherine would never have considered. Raised on the Whig principles of her father, Catherine, like so many of her American contemporaries, would have held a deep-seated distrust of professional soldiers and a loathing of standing peacetime armies. While most Americans in the early decades of the nineteenth century might extend begrudging recognition to the services the army provided the nation, a significant number also condemned the institution as a needless drain on the national treasury and a potential threat to the liberties of the people. In addition, since the establishment of the West Point in 1802, a growing number of critics believed the academy was unconstitutional and charged that it used public funds to produce a military aristocracy.4 Yet, for the widow Cooke, there were more important considerations. West Point offered a first-rate education at no cost to cadets or their families. Furthermore, once her son completed his term of service, which in 1823 would have been only one year of active duty after graduation, he would be prepared to enter any number of professional fields.5
While Cooke left no record of his reaction to the appointment, in June 1823, he made the long journey from Virginia to New York’s Hudson River Valley to begin his military career. In spite of his youth—he likely celebrated his fourteenth birthday during the journey—Cooke passed his entrance examinations and was admitted to the academy. Little, however, is known of Cadet Cooke’s life at West Point over the next four years. As a fourth year cadet, he undoubtedly suffered the hazing endured by all “Plebes,” and until he mastered the minutia of the academy’s regulations, he certainly walked his share of punishment tours for accumulated demerits and other infractions. Academically, young Cooke struggled with the rigorous curriculum designed by the academy’s superintendent, Captain Sylvanus Thayer. In addition to numerous engineering courses, which formed the core of the academy’s curriculum, Cooke attended classes in chemistry, geography, history, philosophy, ethics, and law introduced by Thayer to produce officers who were among the best educated college graduates in the country. Evidence also suggests that Cooke mastered French while at the academy. In terms of martial instruction, Cooke studied the classic works of the day: Steuben’s Blue Book, Antoine Henri de Jomini’s Traité des grandes operations militaries, and William L. Duane’s two-volume study of warfare, simply titled The American Military Library, as well as the latest treatments on the strategies and tactics of the Napoleonic era. Beginning in 1823, Cooke also participated in the summer encampments initiated by Thayer that allowed cadets to put into practice the infantry and artillery tactics they studied.  

Yet, the most impacting lessons Cooke learned at the academy were those that conflicted with Thayer’s mission to create a strong, competent corps of professionals. Newspaper editorials, speeches by public figures and government officials, and addresses given at the academy consistently reminded cadets that they were about to become officers in an institution
that was despised by their countrymen. While attacks on the academy itself had not yet reached the frenzied pitch they would once Andrew Jackson won the White House and ushered in the “Age of the Common Man,” public condemnation of the regular army was an accepted norm. As noted military historian Marcus Cunliffe observed, “By the beginning of the nineteenth century . . . the pattern was set. In the next sixty years American military attitudes did not basically change. A regular army continued to be regarded as a doubtful necessity.” In fact, the attitudes of most Americans could be summed up—ironically—in the words of a petition sent to the British Parliament in 1816 demanding the reduction of Great Britain’s army. According to the petitioners, the army was “uncalled for by the internal and external state of the country, repugnant to all the wise principles and maxims of our ancestors, highly dangerous to the liberties of the people, subversive of the constitution, . . . increasing and perpetrating a corrupt and overwhelming influence, poisoning the very sources of national happiness and prosperity.” Or as an Ohio member of the House of Representatives declared on the House floor three decades later: “The army is cancer upon the body politic. It is striking its fibres into the vital parts of society, and extending its virus into the veins and arteries of the Government, and if continued, must sooner or later dissolve our institutions.”

In short, cadets were repeatedly told from nearly every source outside of the academy the profession of arms was not a profession to which they should aspire. The pay was abysmal. Promotions, which were based on seniority, were agonizingly slow. Furthermore, as there were no longer any threats of war with Europe, graduating cadets could no longer aspire to find martial glory. Again, as Cunliffe plainly states, long before the cadet left West Point, he was aware that “he was entering a career without much prestige, without much future, and with every
kind of negative and positive inducement to turn himself back into a civilian before it was too late.”

After four years, Cooke graduated as a member of the class of 1827. He had, however, done little to gain distinction over his classmates. Ranked twenty-third among the thirty-seven cadets graduating in his class, Cooke was among the “goats,” and therefore, destined to serve in the army’s infantry branch. Entry into the army’s other three branches: the engineering, ordnance, and artillery, were reserved for graduates with the highest academic standings. Yet, Cooke was undisturbed by the limited career fields offered by his class standing. In July, when he received his commission as a second lieutenant in the Sixth United States Infantry with orders directing him to report for duty at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, he joyously accepted both.

Cooke set off on the month-long journey across the trans-Appalachian West with the wide-eyed enthusiasm of a teenager on his first great adventure. He viewed each day of travel as one leading him away from the settled and refined regions of his childhood toward the rough and tumble world of his nation’s frontier and his enthusiasm allowed nothing to taint the venture—not the bone-jarring coach ride across Maryland and Ohio, nor the slow-going passage of the steamboat he boarded in Cincinnati to float the final leg of his journey. He was surrounded by dozens of other newly commissioned officers bound for western posts, and they were equally swept up in the novelty of the experience. Over conversations and card games, dinners and drinks, and onshore forays to racetracks and taverns, Cooke made fast friends with the other freshly commissioned officers sharing his journey west.

When Cooke finally arrived at his new duty station, his enchantment continued to grow. Given an unexpected weekend furlough by the post’s commanding officer, Colonel Henry Leavenworth, Cooke and his new companions quickly made their way to nearby St. Louis where
the rawness of the town dazzled the young lieutenant. “St. Louis had very little of the Anglo-American character,” he noted. Yet, it was the romantic possibilities offered by its distinct character that held its greatest appeal. Its streets were morasses of mud, lined with seedy hotels, and all seemed crowded with vulgar French-speaking creoles, Indians, mountain men, fur traders, and river boatmen. Their combined “rowdyism,” a confused mixture of crude manners, gesticulations, and languages, utterly captured Cooke’s imagination. Unlike other members of his party who seemed offended by these rugged and “well armed” characters “in outré dress,” Cooke clearly admired the spirit of adventure these roughhewn individuals presented. It was they who led the independent lives of the fur trappers who explored the distant Rocky Mountains searching for beaver, or manned the flat-boats that poled commerce on the nation’s interior river networks. These men lived the “wild and lawless way of life” offered by the frontier and Cooke wanted to sample the same before leaving the army.11

When Cooke returned to Jefferson Barracks, however, he quickly discovered the needs of the army superseded his dreams of frontier adventure. The post to which he had been assigned had been authorized a year earlier on March 4, 1826, by the army’s commanding general, Major General Jacob J. Brown. Its purpose was twofold. First, as the army’s School of Infantry Practice, Jefferson Barracks promoted the professionalization of the service by allowing officers to develop their martial abilities through the instruction of infantry tactics, close order drill, marksmanship, and other exercises to new recruits as well as regular army units rotated into the post. Second, Jefferson Barracks also provided security by concentrating troops at a strategic location to safeguard settlements throughout the region drained by the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. Since the conclusion of the War of 1812, the primary function of the army in the West was to intimidate the region’s Indian populations and break the influence of British fur traders
who many blamed for the tribal uprisings during the late conflict. The combined functions of the post were especially important in light of the fact that since the conclusion of the war American settlers had flooded into the Ohio and upper Mississippi River Valleys and ushered into being several states and territories for the Union.

Yet the newness of the post dictated that the soldiers stationed at Jefferson Barracks spent little time improving their martial skills. Instead of instructing soldiers in close order drills, Cooke and the other officers passed their days supervising the construction of the buildings that would house the Sixth Infantry. Months were required to complete the construction since the soldiers who would call the buildings home were also charged with fabricating the materials they would use. In addition, members of the Sixth Infantry were also required to build the other structures needed by the regiment like stables, storerooms, kitchens, and mess halls.

Construction projects were not the only unmilitary duties that distracted from the instruction of infantry tactics. Soldiers were also charged with the oversight of company and regimental vegetable gardens and agricultural fields, as well as maintaining supplies of firewood and tending to the care of livestock. Since 1818, the War Department mandated that all western military posts maintain these extensive agricultural fields as an exercise in self-sufficiency to reduce government expenditures—especially the excessive costs required to transport such supplies to the more isolated outposts. Although rank spared Cooke and his fellow officers from performing these physical labors, they—officers and enlisted men alike—were nonetheless disturbed by the unmilitary character of their duties. As one enlisted man later recorded:

\[ \text{I am deceived; I enlisted for a soldier; I enlisted because I preferred military duty to hard work; I never was given to understand that the implements of agriculture and the mechanic’s tools were to be placed in my hands before I had received a musket or drawn a uniform coat. I never was told that I would be called on to make roads, build bridges, quarry stone, burn brick and lime,} \]
carry the hod, cut wood, hew timber, construct it into rafts and float it to the garrisons, make shingles, saw plank, build mills, maul rails, drive teams, make hay, herd cattle, build stables, construct barracks, hospitals, &c., &c., &c., which takes more time for their completion than the period of my enlistment.¹⁵

Still, not even the prospect of living in a tent until his quarters were built could dampen Cooke’s enthusiasm. By the summer of 1827, Jefferson Barracks was one of the largest military installations in the country. Its garrison consisted of six companies of the First Infantry, six companies from the Third Infantry, and all ten companies of the Sixth Infantry.¹⁶ Instead of dwelling on the tedium of his duties or the hardships of his living conditions, Cooke focused on the camaraderie of his new associations. He played cards and practical jokes when presented with an opportunity, and as young men are wont to do in such environments, he frequently roughhoused with his companions when off duty. He also became a regular at the dinners hosted by the senior officers of the Sixth and First regiments. These units had only recently returned from a seven-year posting near Council Bluffs in Iowa Territory, and the association of these officers provided a sense of solidarity that nourished Cooke’s idealistic image of army life. The gatherings were spirited occasions marked by free-flowing wine and spirits, as well as tales of “marvelous adventure” on the frontier. “Right joyous was it to mingle with those officers, whose minds and manners had received a fresh mould from their life in the generous, the open-hearted, daring and adventurous—the frank and hospitable far West,” Cooke fondly recalled.¹⁷

In spite of his seeming enthusiasm, Cooke quietly dreamed of experiencing frontier adventures similar to those he heard from the veteran members of his regiment. Yet, it would be more than a year before he finally received the orders that would provide the opportunity. Fears of an uprising of Winnebago Indians spread throughout western Michigan Territory (modern Wisconsin) throughout the fall of 1828 as unlicensed white speculators illegally invaded the
tribe’s land searching for lead deposits. In the wake of the murders committed by tribesmen the year before, army officials quickly transferred personnel to garrisons in the region to keep the peace. Cooke was directed to escort forty recruits in a pair of Mackinaw boats to Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien in modern Wisconsin, and then to take another group farther up the Mississippi to Fort Snelling in modern Minnesota. It was the young lieutenant’s first independent command, and in September, he accepted the assignment with the same enthusiasm as he had his commission a year earlier.

The journey was remarkable only in terms of the physical rigor required to get the boats to their destination. During great stretches of the voyage, the Mackinaw boats needed to be pulled by their crews along sandbars and through shallows when the currents became too strong. Still, in spite of the mundane nature of the assignment, Cooke savored every moment of the journey. Although he regularly sailed past tiny villages and towns throughout the journey, the young officer could not resist imagining he was among the first white men to ever pass through the region. Each vista spied from the river presented him with glimpses of pristine wilderness that he frequently could not refrain from experiencing firsthand. Using the excuse that his rifle served as the “sole commissary” for the party, he went ashore to hunt as a pretext for exploring the forests lining the river’s course.

During the return voyage, however, Cooke experienced an interesting encounter with the civilian elements of the region that shaped his opinion of frontier settlers. He was sailing back to Jefferson Barracks with an old friend from Fort Snelling when, at Galena, Illinois, the travelers decided to exchange the Spartan accommodations of their Mackinaw boat for the luxury of a room and beds aboard a riverboat. The steamer was scheduled to depart the next day, so Cooke and his companion ventured into the bustling town to inspect its character. Finding their way
into a barn-like structure that served as a tavern and gambling den, the lieutenant was instantly struck by the motley collection filling the great room. Unlike the rugged assembly of Indians, fur trappers, and river boatmen in St. Louis that had inspired so many visions of high adventure the year before, the gathering of miners, gamblers, and apparent outlaws offended Cooke with their manner and appearance. They were not the free-spirited adventurers braving nature and wild Indians to win their keep. These men were predators preying on society by living on its fringes or outside its boundaries.

In spite of his reservations, he joined a card game at a table populated by seven characters that he sarcastically described as “the most respectable citizens of the town.” Although fortune initially smiled on Cooke, he was glad to leave the table a loser a few hours later. Given the questionable nature of his tablemates, he was uncertain of how the other gamblers might react to his quitting the game with their money. His apprehensions seemed well founded the next morning when he learned that the body of another gambler had been discovered floating in the river with his throat cut.20

Lieutenant Cooke finally returned to Jefferson Barracks on December 2, 1828. Although the mission had taken him near the limits of American settlement in the upper reaches of the Mississippi Valley, it hardly sated his desire for adventure. Fortunately, it would not be long until he was presented with the opportunity he so craved. During the fall of 1828, while he was navigating the Mississippi River, Comanche warriors attacked two separate merchant caravans on the Santa Fe Trail. The Indians killed three men and stole a considerable number of draft animals, compelling Missouri officials to demand military protection for the caravans that would be setting off from the state later in the spring.
Since the first merchants had crossed the continent’s interior to establish the trade route in 1821, the Santa Fe Trail had become an increasingly vital component of Missouri’s economy. Each year merchants loaded wagons with assortments of brightly colored fabrics and textiles, domestic wares, tools, and other goods to trade in the New Mexican capital for profits of up to one hundred percent or more of their retail values in the states. The potential for profits soon attracted wholesale merchants and suppliers to Missouri who specialized in goods considered especially suited to the Santa Fe trade. Most important of all, in the specie poor western United States, the silver coins brought back to Missouri by the merchants established a much needed infusion of currency in the largely barter-based economy. Reacting to the potential threat to the commerce of his state, Missouri’s alarmed governor, John Miller, declared: “That trade is one of much importance to this State; the principal part of the silver coin in circulation . . . is derived from that quarter [Santa Fe].” In April, the army responded to the alarm by ordering four companies of the Sixth Infantry to reconnoiter the trail and escort the spring caravan to the border with Mexico. The mission would not only provide a degree of protection for the merchants until they reached the Mexican border, but would allow the army to conduct the first reconnaissance of the trail to gather information of strategic value: availability of water, forage, disposition of Indian tribes, and possible locations for military installations. Still, the idea of guarding avenues of commerce or gathering strategically important information mattered little to the young officer. Escorting the merchants across the Santa Fe Trail to the border with Mexico was the opportunity to experience the frontier that he had been waiting for, and he leapt at the chance to join the mission.²¹

In April, Cooke and the members of the four-company escort commanded by Major Bennett Riley boarded the Diana at Jefferson Barracks and set off for Cantonment Leavenworth.
At the outpost located on the Missouri River in modern Kansas, the command would finish outfitting and await the arrival of the spring grasses that would signal the opening of the travel season. Finally, on June 5, Major Riley led his command, twenty wagons, four ox carts, and a six-pound howitzer out of Cantonment Leavenworth toward Round Grove—a wooded oasis located fifty miles west of the installation on the Neosho River. The site of the rendezvous was considered the last stand of hardwood trees between the eastern woodlands and the Rockies to the west. Since the establishment of the Santa Fe Trail, it had become a popular location for merchants to gather, make repairs, and assemble their caravans for the journey to New Mexico. Although Riley hoped to cover the distance in only a few days, the passage from Leavenworth took six days due to delays created by the lack of ferries to transport the battalion across the Missouri and the muddy roads that swallowed the escort’s rolling stock. By June 11, however, the battalion encamped at the edge of the Round Grove where a company of merchants had elected St. Louis trader Charles Bent as their “captain,” or leader for the duration of their upcoming journey. The caravan consisted of thirty-eight wagons and approximately seventy-nine merchants and armed guards.22

Setting off before sunrise the next morning, the party trekked fifteen to twenty-five miles each day for the next month across present-day Kansas. Although the military was assigned to escort the traders to the border, Riley’s command rarely marched alongside the traders. In fact, there was little communication or interactions of any kind between the two groups. The two parties marched separately, maintained individual rates of march, and established separate camps each evening. The only precautions that were undertaken were to ensure that the distance between the two groups did not become too great to overcome in case of an emergency. For Lieutenant Cooke, however, the segregation provided welcome relief from the disorderly and
undisciplined characters traveling in the merchant caravan. Assigned the task of maintaining the expedition’s official journal, Cooke revealed his opinion that most of the hired hands riding with the merchants “could not overcome the self-willed notions and vagrant propensities” of frontiersmen to comprehend the danger they faced on the trail. They were, he continued, “presumptuous” and “ignorant.”

Still, opinions aside, the lieutenant could not hide his enthusiasm for the adventure. Emerging from the “somber forests” of the east onto the prairies and plains of the frontier was an “exhilarating experience.” Yet, it was also an exhausting trial of endurance. After an early march of nearly twenty-six miles, Cooke noted that he “was scarcely able to raise a foot from the ground” by the time the order to establish the evening’s camp was delivered. The next day he expected to be so sore that he would be unable to move. Yet, as he cheerfully observed, when he arose he was “as supple and fresh as ever.”

As the escort advanced, however, Cooke continued to observe conditions that caused him to question the feasibility of deploying infantry troops for escort duty in such environments. Daily the battalion faced temperature extremes, water and fuel shortages, and difficult river and creek crossings that all combined to drain men of their strength.

Although initially fascinated by the scenery alongside the trail, after a seemingly endless series of days with nothing but an ocean of grass to greet his gaze, Cooke became numbed by the monotony of the plains. Still, he never fully lost his appreciation for the environment. Between Council Grove and the Arkansas River, the escort frequently camped along the banks of the tributary streams that drained the watershed, allowing the lieutenant and the other members of the patrol ample opportunities to hunt and fish. Cooke was also fascinated with the variety of wildlife inhabiting the plains. In his journal he noted the appearance of foxes and badgers, herds
of prong-horn antelope and deer, jack rabbits, rattlesnakes, and thousands of wolves. He was particularly intrigued with the expansive prairie dog villages the escort encountered as it neared the Arkansas. Yet, like all nineteenth-century travelers, he waited expectantly for the first sighting of buffalo. Among the officers it was the topic of numerous conversations and nearly all waited in anticipation of their opportunity to bring down one of the shaggy beasts. More importantly, once the herds were encountered, the animals would constitute the battalion’s main source of meat to preserve their supply of salt pork. Thus, when a herd was spotted a few days beyond Walnut Creek, the young lieutenant quickly secured permission to join a mounted hunting party and excitedly raced toward the grazing animals. Cooke and the other inexperienced hunters rode into the fleeing herd wildly firing their weapons. Although they eventually managed to bring one down, they were astonished at the number of shots required to kill the animal. The buffalo, Cooke observed, “seemed endued with many lives.”

It was also likely that the eager lieutenant wondered when the first encounters with the “hostile” tribesmen would occur. Yet, much to his disappointment, beyond the disappearance of a few horses, no signs of Indians were detected by the time the caravan reached the vicinity of Chouteau’s Island on July 9. The location was recognized as the border between the United States and Mexico, and as Riley’s orders explicitly forbid entering Mexican territory, the battalion encamped along the northern bank of the Arkansas to await the return of the merchants in early October, as directed by the War Department. Near dusk, however, a few traders rode “furiously” into camp, and hurriedly explained that mounted warriors, most likely Comanche and Kiowa, had attacked the caravan six miles away. Immediately, Riley ordered the battalion to the relief of the traders. Although injured a few days earlier and unable to walk, Cooke begged his commanding officer for permission to join his company and fight in the expected battle on
horseback. Riley refused the request and placed the lieutenant in command of the escort’s baggage train and the rear guard.27

Delayed nearly two hours ushering the command’s wagons and carts across the swollen Arkansas River, Cooke and the rear guard were left behind by Riley and the main body of troops. With nothing but moonlight to guide his movements, Cooke advanced cautiously over the well-worn trail into Mexican territory, and arrived at the traders’ defensive site well after midnight. To the young soldier’s disappointment, the balance of the night passed quietly. Then at dawn Cooke’s sense of lost opportunity increased as the Indians were seen moving away from the amphitheater of rocks in which the merchants had taken refuge.

The sight convinced many that the immediate danger had passed and plans were made by the leading merchants to resume their march toward Santa Fe. To scout the trail ahead, fifty armed and well-mounted members of the merchant party were sent to inspect a pass that obscured the trail from sight a few miles from the refuge. As the scouts neared the pass, they were suddenly charged by a group of warriors that had been lying in ambush. Stricken with panic, the caravan scouts instantly turned their horses and raced toward the wagons and the safety of their comrades. All the men escaped, save one whose mule was quickly overtaken by the horse-born warriors. Although the Indians broke off their attack before coming within rifle range of merchants and soldiers, the incident convinced Riley to extend his escort further into Mexican territory. The caravan merchants pleaded repeatedly for Riley to escort their wagons all the way to Santa Fe, but after three days with no further indications of an Indian presence, the major believed the danger had passed and decided to leave the merchants at the Cimarron Crossing. As he had neither orders nor permission to enter Mexico, Riley thought it best to
return to U.S. territory before being discovered. The captain’s decision satisfied Cooke, who attributed the traders’ pleas to cowardice.\textsuperscript{28}

As July drew to a close, Riley’s battalion returned to its campsite on the Arkansas. Believing the Indians that attacked the trade caravan had scattered, the atmosphere in the camp was relaxed. Then, on July 31, a small party of warriors fell on four soldiers returning to Missouri after their enlistments had expired. Three days later, four hundred warriors suddenly descended on the battalion’s campsite around two o’clock in the afternoon. Commanding the camp guard, Lieutenant Cooke noticed the elaborately attired warriors attempting to drive off the battalion’s livestock and instinctively advanced his forty infantry men to the camp’s left to shore up a gap in the battalion’s defenses. Repeated volleys of musket fire turned the charging Indians and caused them to begin circling the camp while probing for other weaknesses in its perimeter. Shortly thereafter, Riley deployed Cooke’s men to the camp’s front to repel yet another attempt by the warriors to breach the infantry’s position. Once again, the rapid volleys fired by Cooke’s foot soldiers kept the Indians at bay, but the lieutenant became frustrated with the inability of his soldiers to press the fight against the mounted warriors. Rather than attack the encampment, the Indians circled, feigning an occasional charge but always pulling up just beyond musket range. Focused on his growing aggravations with the battle, Cooke was initially startled when the howitzer crew discharged a round of grape shot into the Indians’ ranks. Detonating among a cluster of Indians over a mile distant, the shell burst created terrific confusion among the warriors and quickly convinced them to break off their attack.\textsuperscript{29}

Striking again on August 11, the Indians attacked a party of soldiers that had crossed the Arkansas to hunt buffalo. Cooke courageously led a company across the river to relieve the men and recover a fallen comrade. Although Cooke’s actions earned him the respect of his
commanding officer, the engagement was yet another humiliating experience for the young officer. Horses, he believed, made the Plains Indians audacious. While the backbone of the regular army, Cooke immediately recognized that infantry simply could not effectively challenge mounted warriors. Cooke was convinced that regular army cavalry would have soundly whipped horse-borne Indians. Yet, regrettably, the army had disbanded that branch of service in 1821, amidst charges that it was elitist and aristocratic, and contrary to the American character. It was equally lamentable, as far as Cooke was concerned, that no more attacks came.  

In the aftermath of the assaults on their camp, the members of the Sixth Infantry assumed a vigilant posture along the northern bank of the Arkansas River while they awaited the return of the traders. Riley insisted that the battalion members adhere to the same regulations that would govern their lives if in garrison. As a result the battalion passed each day of the next two months observing a heavily regimented schedule of daily roll calls, inspections, guard and fatigue duties, and few opportunities to venture away from camp. Even hunting was forbidden except by organized parties of fifteen to twenty men under the command of an officer. It was a period of mind-numbing dullness for Cooke. The camp moved only when the livestock consumed the grass in the surrounding area—and then, Riley never led his command more than eighty miles from the Arkansas Crossing. To fill his off-duty hours, Cooke, like all members of the command, searched for activities. During the weeks that followed, he fished in the nearby stream and repeatedly read the few books others had brought on the expedition. He also became quite adept at making powder-horns and other articles like eating utensils, cups, combs, and buttons from the hundreds of buffalo skeletons littering the vicinity of the military’s encampments. Although he made no comment on his particular skill, Cooke noted that several
members of the escort were exceptionally talented craftsmen and the articles they produced were meticulously carved and often inlaid with bone as added ornamentation.\textsuperscript{31}

After lingering on the Arkansas for two months, the battalion started its return march on October 12. Riley had agreed to wait for the merchants until October 10 before he turned his command eastward, but as no word had reached him regarding their whereabouts on the appointed day, the major believed he had honored his agreement. The frosty mornings greeting the soldiers each day at reveille served unmistakable notice that the season was changing, and Riley was very much aware that his command was unprepared for the cool fall weather that was rapidly approaching. As Cooke noted, “the summer clothing of the men was nearly worn out.”\textsuperscript{32}

The battalion had only marched a few hours when the rear guard alerted Major Riley to the approach of several riders on the escort’s back trail. Unable to identify the riders, Riley halted the battalion and ordered his command to assume defensive positions. To everyone’s relief, the horsemen were eventually identified as express riders from the merchant caravan. The traders were still on the Mexican side of the Arkansas but would be crossing the river within a few hours with an escort of Mexican regulars and militia troops. As a courtesy Riley directed his command to make camp and prepare to receive guests.

When the traders arrived with their Mexican companions, Cooke was hardly impressed. The escort consisted of a strange collection of uniformed regulars and militia composed of Indians and Mexicans traveling with an assortment of French fur trappers and exile-seeking Spaniards and their attendants. While he was impressed with the skills displayed by the Spaniards and their attendants “throwing the lazo, [and] catching wild mules,” he was sorely disappointed in the martial bearing of the escort’s troops. As a professionally trained soldier and officer in the United States Army, Cooke resented the idea that the shabby assemblage of
uniformed Mexicans might be considered of the same professional caliber as he and his companions by those less informed. In Cooke’s opinion, the Mexican troops were little more than “mere apologies for soldiers, or even men.” In fact, after seeing the company of Mexican regulars pass in review, the young officer had so little regard for their martial abilities he recorded that “a volley from the regular company, at fifty paces, would have proved of small consideration.”

Three weeks later, the Sixth returned to Cantonment Leavenworth. Located on a series of bluffs overlooking the Missouri River, the post had been initially established to serve as a guardian for the fur trade on the upper Missouri and to protect the Santa Fe trade. As the decade came to an end, however, the role of the post was being redefined. Prior to the passage of the Indian Removal Act, the federal government began negotiating treaties with various eastern tribes in an attempt to remove their populations from the rapidly filling states and territories being carved out of the Old Northwest Territory onto new homelands in the still unsettled territories of the Louisiana Purchase. The new task assigned to the soldiers of the Sixth Infantry at Cantonment Leavenworth would be to ensure the peaceful settlement of the tribes, which included the Delaware, Shawnee, Wyandot, Kickapoo, and the Sac and Fox. The Sixth Infantry would not only ensure the relocated Indians were protected against abuses from frontier settlers—namely the trafficking of illegal liquor by unscrupulous traders—but from the horse-born warriors from the Great Plains.

For the twenty-year-old second lieutenant, the transfer of the Sixth Infantry from Jefferson Barracks to Cantonment Leavenworth marked the start of a wondrous period in his life. Cooke initially described the outpost as “a struggling cantonment,” but as he had resolved to make a career out of the army, he came to view the outpost as his home over the course of the

21
next three years. In many respects, its isolation allowed him to be exposed to those elements of
the frontier that had captured his imagination two years earlier. The adventure-minded soldier
came into regular contact with fur traders and mountain men whose “racy anecdotes” of life in
the Rocky Mountains delighted him. Cooke also heard several distinguished Indian leaders
speak at the treaty councils held at the post. On a couple of occasions he heard Tenskwatawa,
the Shawnee Prophet, speak, and at another council gathering, he heard the great Pawnee chief
Capot Bleu. While Cooke regarded the former as “an old man, but little distinguished in
appearance,” he found the latter to be “a chief remarkable for dignity and suavity of manners—a
born gentleman.”35 In fact, Cooke’s frequent contact with Indians at Cantonment Leavenworth
also sparked a curiosity to learn what he could of the “manners, customs, and traditions of the
aboriginal tribes” with which he had such regular contact. In particular, he became a self-
professed student of the Otoe, Iowa, Omaha, Kansa, and Pawnee tribes.36

Isolated on the edge of western settlement, Cooke was determined to occupy his off-duty
hours with diversions other than those typically embraced by soldiers attempting to escape the
doldrums of garrison duty. “The greatest danger of our situation was the lethargy and rust of
mind, so naturally induced where no exciting motive, no necessity, urges on to the labor of
exertion,” he noted.37 In order to maintain mental and physical acuity, Cooke joined study
groups and informal debating societies. And, as “Nature in her untamed beauty” surrounded the
post, Cooke joined hunting parties and studied flora and fauna of the lower Missouri Valley. His
greatest enjoyments, however, were the balls and other social gatherings held at Cantonment
Leavenworth. The belles traveling from St. Louis, Louisville, and Cincinnati to attend the
celebrations “gave greater zest to diversions and exercise” than normally offered by life at the*outpost. In pleasurable company, the officers and their ladies “would canter for miles through
prairie and grove” to while away hours at a scenic location “where the world had never made its mark.”

Early in 1830, Cooke met and quickly fell in love with Rachel Wilts Hertzog. The daughter of a prosperous Philadelphia merchant, Rachel arrived at the post after her father obtained a traders license and extended his operations to include Cantonment Leavenworth. In all likelihood, the two were introduced by Cooke’s friend John Dougherty, an Indian agent who resided at the post and was married to Rachel’s sister, Mary. Following a brief courtship, the two wed on October 28, 1830.

With the exception of a brief voyage to the Otoe and Omaha villages near Council Bluffs in 1831, Cooke stayed close to Cantonment Leavenworth until 1832. For the young officer and newlywed his years at the outpost had been filled with happy memories, but as the years passed, garrison life was beginning to lose its luster and he again longed for “the bustle of a campaign.”

His wish seemingly came true in 1832, when a conflict over treaty rights threatened war in western Illinois.

The dispute erupted two years earlier, in 1830, when the followers of the Sac war chief Black Hawk returned from Iowa Territory to their traditional farming village of Saukenuk near the mouth of the Rock River. The Indians had been warned by their agent the previous year not to return their western Illinois homeland due to the growing number of whites spreading into the area, but the Black Hawk’s British band—so called for their historical animosity towards Americans and their continued loyalty to the British—ignored their agent and returned that spring to plant their corn crop as they had done for generations. At issue was a clause in an 1804 treaty signed by the tribe ceding their lands east of the Mississippi River in what is now western Illinois and southern Wisconsin to the United States, but allowed them to continue using their
former holdings until settlement required their permanent removal to Iowa Territory. At that
time the tribes’ former homeland would be surveyed, sold, and the Indians would be required to
move. Black Hawk protested the agreement: first declaring the annuity paid by the United States
for the land was insufficient, and secondly that the territory surrounding Saukenuk had yet to be
surveyed or sold.41 In the face of the rapidly advancing tide of white settlement in the Rock
River Valley, however, the veracity of Black Hawk’s claims mattered little.

When Black Hawk’s British band again ignored their agent’s warnings and returned to
Saukenuk to plant in the spring of 1831, their arrival in Illinois instantly sparked panic among
white settlers. Newly elected Governor John Reynolds threatened to call out the state’s militia
and exterminate Black Hawk’s band if federal officials did not act. In June, the War Department
sent General Edmund P. Gaines, the commander of the army’s Western Department, to settle the
dispute—and after ordering the state militia to destroy Saukenuk—he secured Black Hawk’s
agreement to a new treaty by the end of July.42

Peace, however, continued to elude the troubled region. When the government failed to
deliver sufficient supplies of corn to the British Band in Iowa, groups of Black Hawk’s people
quietly slipped across the Mississippi and returned to their fields near Saukenuk, which kept the
area’s white settlers in an alarmed state. It was, however, the news that a party of Sac warriors
had massacred a delegation of unarmed Menominee Indians that finally triggered the war. The
murders were an act of retribution for a similar incident that had occurred the year before near
Fort Armstrong, when Menominee and Nakota warriors slaughtered a group of Fox chiefs. But
rather than dismissing the murders as just another act in an endless series of brutalities
committed between rival tribes, the Illinois settlers were convinced that the murders marked the
beginning of a campaign by Black Hawk to reclaim his people’s traditional homelands—an idea
that gained strength after it was learned the war chief was offering sanctuary to the warriors who had committed the crimes. The people of Illinois demanded the federal government act, and in early March 1832, President Andrew Jackson ordered Brigadier General Henry Atkinson to punish Black Hawk’s people.

Eager to prove his mettle once again, Cooke secured a berth with one of the Sixth Infantry companies deployed to Illinois with Atkinson. For the young officer the war represented another opportunity for adventure and the promise of combat against native warriors. Yet, almost from the moment he arrived at Fort Armstrong, near Rock Island, Illinois on April 8, Cooke grew steadily concerned about the nature of the conflict that lay ahead. On April 16, General Atkinson applied to Illinois’ Governor Reynolds to call out two thousand militia troops after learning Black Hawk’s band had invaded the state near Yellow Banks with an estimated 600 to 800 Sac and Fox warriors, and perhaps as many as 150 Potawatomi and Kickapoo braves, to aid his efforts. Yet, once militia troops began to arrive at Rock Island, Cooke grew increasingly concerned regarding their abilities to execute their duties.

Like most nineteenth century Americans, Cooke—even as a professional soldier—likely accepted traditional American doctrines that declared the nation’s “real” defenders to be the citizen soldiers of the state militias. It was a concept older than the nation, inherited from the Whig principles cherished by their British forbearers, and since independence, had only grown stronger in the minds of Americans. Furthermore, it was a concept that had been repeatedly drilled into the minds of West Point cadets since the inception of the institution. Yet, it was Cooke’s first exposure to civilian soldiers and he was immediately alarmed by their martial ignorance, their undisciplined and insubordinate character, and their apparent wantonness to do little more than kill Indians.43
While recognizing the militia had answered their governor’s call to arms with eager enthusiasm, Cooke thought them to be reckless and inept. Whereas he initially viewed the militia soldiers as being “as active as a swarming hive,” he quickly grew alarmed by their amateurish conduct. A great concern for the young officers was the inherent flaw with the very nature of militia organizations: the election of officers. As Cooke observed, candidates who would enforce “disagreeable regulations and constraints” were seldom popular choices for the electorate. As a result the wrong men were too often elected as officers, which led to a lack of discipline among the militia troops and an uncertainty regarding their ability to perform effectively their duties as soldiers. Cooke, in fact, held the militia in such contempt that he refused a major’s commission and an appointment as an aid-de-camp in one of the militia brigades. As he later recalled, he simply “did not fancy the connection.”

Atkinson, however, was convinced that the 340 regulars at his disposal were insufficient to take the field. Although he also had misgivings about the militia, he gladly accepted the nearly two thousand citizen soldiers who arrived at Rock Island and Beardstown to be mustered into service. If Black Hawk intended to defend his people’s right to their homeland, Atkinson needed these militiamen, especially the approximately 1,500 mounted volunteers assembled at Beardstown, to make a convincing demonstration of force. Initially, Atkinson intended to rely on the mobility of the mounted militia troops to bring his quarry to bay, and on May 9, he ordered them to advance up the Rock River to the vicinity of the village of White Cloud, or the “Winnebago Prophet.” He would use his force of regular and militia infantry units, all under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Zachary Taylor, to forward supplies. The mounted troops, under the command of militia General Samuel Whiteside, were ordered to leave Beardstown,
search the Rock River Valley and find the British Band’s location. Whiteside was authorized to attack Black Hawk or otherwise force his surrender.\textsuperscript{45}

Simple as the plan seemed, within days of the campaign’s start, the concerns regarding the abilities of the militia proved well-founded. As Whiteside’s command descended the Rock River, he detached a brigade of 275 men under the command of Major Isaiah Stillman to advance ahead of the main column and locate Black Hawk’s village. The detachment quickly raced nearly forty-five miles in advance of Whiteside as it looked for the British Band. As the sun began to set and the brigade established its camp along the Sycamore Creek, a small party of Indians was seen approaching. Before orders could be issued, a few of the militia members grabbed their horses and charged the approaching Indians. Moments later, another party of Indians was spotted further away, and still more members of Stillman’s command raced out of camp without orders.

In the confused rush to capture the two groups of Indians, perhaps eight in total, someone discharged their weapon, prompting others to open fire as well. In the melee that followed, three of the Indians were killed. The others escaped. Yet, before Stillman’s command could fully celebrate their victory, panic swept through their ranks as the war whoops of an indeterminate number of approaching warrior echoed through the woods surrounding the militia. Again, before orders could be issued organizing a defense, Stillman’s soldiers fled. Only a handful of the militia stood their ground to face the onslaught, but they were quickly overpowered and killed. As for the balance of the militia along the Sycamore, in their panic they abandoned their equipment and supplies, raced without stopping through their camp, and left their fellow militia members to fend for themselves. Their flight did not end until they reached the safety of Dixon’s Ferry—twenty five miles to the rear of where the “battle” had taken place.\textsuperscript{46}
The engagement at Stillman’s Run was a humiliating defeat for the American. Still, in all probability, Cooke was more outraged by the subsequent actions of the volunteers. Terrified by the exaggerated accounts of Indian brutalities inflicted on Stillman’s soldiers, other militia troops grew increasingly timid and hesitant to resume their pursuit. Others, individually and in pockets, began to desert, and by the end of May, the militia had become so demoralized that they were demanding to be released from duty. Atkinson attempted to restore the confidence of his volunteer forces by deploying them on more conservative missions; however, it quickly became apparent that the militiamen’s courage had vanished. As a result, their usefulness diminished with their morale, and ultimately convinced the commanding general to release the militia. Atkinson then requested Governor Reynolds call for two thousand new volunteers. It was a decision that Atkinson knew would cause considerable delays, but under the circumstances it was obvious that forcing the militiamen to remain under arms would work to the detriment of the campaign.47

During the ensuing weeks Atkinson, the regulars, and a few hundred militiamen who declined discharge, established their base of operations near Ottawa, Illinois as citizens answering the second militia levy were mustered into service—a process that Cooke described as “painfully slow.” The young officer’s criticism stemmed from the fact that despite his refusal to accept a militia commission, he was busily engaged in the organization of militia units into the brigades Atkinson would deploy during the upcoming campaign. Cooke was equally displeased by the inability of militia officers to learn the simplest of tasks—like writing and filing proper morning reports. Thus it was likely with boundless joy that he received the order to rejoin his company and make ready to leave Ottawa on June 19. Yet, as the columns advanced the conduct
of the militiamen continued to dismay Cooke and contributed mightily to his view of them as
“that prosopopœia of weakness, waste, and confusion.” As he later recorded in his memoir:

The volunteers on this short march, gave us a fine specimen of what was to be expected of their services. They had been ordered to take on their horses some twelve or fifteen days’ rations; on the second morning’s march they raised the cry of “Indians! Indians” when several hundred without orders, or the least order, galloped out of the column, and scattered at full speed over the prairies; - on joining again several miles beyond, it appeared that they had all thrown away the incumbrance of provisions; it was said to have been a manœuvre for that object.

Arriving at Dixon’s Ferry on June 23, Cooke and the other members of the expedition passed the next five days finalizing their preparations and awaiting the arrival of the last two brigades of mounted militia to arrive. Once assembled Atkinson planned to send his army from Dixon’s Ferry in three separate columns to press Black Hawk’s followers away from the settlements and possibly trap them in the vicinity of Lake Koshonong. Finally on June 28, after a month of relative inactivity, the order to march was given. The commanding general deployed his force in three columns to offer the greatest protection to northern Illinois and southern Michigan Territory. General Alexander Posey’s brigade of 925 horsemen, along with two companies of the Sixth Infantry, was ordered to rendezvous with Dodge’s smaller command at Fort Hamilton. General Milton K. Alexander’s brigade of 1,275 men was directed to the Plumb River valley to protect the northwestern portion of Illinois. Atkinson’s force, consisting of the balance of the regulars and General James Henry’s brigade of 959 horsemen, marched out of Dixon’s Ferry to follow the Rock River.

As Atkinson’s force cautiously felt its way along the Rock River toward Lake Koshonong, a sense of growing anticipation seemed to permeate the ranks. Intelligence continued to pour into the general’s headquarters indicating that Black Hawk’s band were held
up in the swamplands surrounding the lake, making preparations to flee east, and eventually cross into Canada. In fact, certain members of the general’s staff were so convinced of Black Hawk’s location, mocked Cooke, they “sketched a map of his stronghold, entrenched among swamps and morasses, the approach through which marvelously resembled the schoolboy puzzle of the walls of Troy.” Yet, as the command arrived at its destination in early July, none of the scouting companies had found any evidence—beyond “the ruins of several ancient villages”—to suggest the enemy’s presence anywhere in the vicinity. Atkinson, however, remained convinced Black Hawk’s followers were at hand. Shortly after arriving at Lake Koshonong he ordered all commands to converge on the lake and begin exploring the surrounding swamps and marshes. The general planned to drive his quarry like so many foxes before the hounds.  

Rather than driving his prey, however, Atkinson’s nine-day foray into the swamps succeeded only in exhausting his commands. Frequent water crossing and movements through bogs and over marshes, all requiring great expenditures of energy, greatly delayed the advance. Soldiers, militia and regulars alike, were absorbed as much with the tasks of digging out steam banks, bridging waterways, or cutting down reeds to reinforce soggy passages as they were looking for Indians. To magnify the misery, equipment and rations were lost or ruined after being unexpectedly submerged. The men also began to suffer the effects of living in such an inhospitable environment: being constantly wet, poorly nourished, and feasted upon by mosquitoes and other insects. Under such conditions it was little wonder that within a few days morning reports from militia units indicated a growing number of deserters and names on the hospital rolls.  

When depleted supplies of rations forced Atkinson to order his command to return to the fort he had ordered constructed near the shores of Lake Koshonong on July 9, Cooke was
especially frustrated with the militia. He later reported that most of the problems suffered by Atkinson’s force were the fault of the volunteers. It was little wonder that no Indians had been discovered. In Cooke’s opinion, the militia troops were incapable of the disciplined conduct necessary to discover the location of an enemy that was actively trying to avoid detection. Among their greatest sins, Cooke noted, was that they regularly fired at deer and other game animals whenever an opportunity arose with little regard for the idea that the army was within a few miles of the enemy camp. Furthermore, the supply problem were almost exclusively the fault of the militia: “It was generally reported and not contradicted, that the volunteers had been improvident and wasteful to the degree of leaving in certain camps rations that had been issued, by the barrel in unbroken bulk!” Furthermore, the militia convoys were “incredibly timid and unmanageable,” and routinely abandoned their supply wagons because “their having imagined that they had seen and Indian or two.” Thus it was with bitter resentment that he read the transcripts of a speech made by “a Western senator” some days later. In the remarks, the senator declared the regulars to be the “sweepings of the cities,” and extolled “frontier men—militia—rangers—(our friends the volunteers), as being infinitely superior.” As another member of the regular army noted: “We also received other disagreeable and mortifying intelligence through the public prints and from other sources . . . that thus far for our toil, exposure, and exertions, we had received nothing but censure; how unjustly, every individual of the army know and felt.”

On July 9, after returning to Lake Koshonong, Atkinson halted the campaign to resupply his command. He ordered three of his militia brigades to Fort Winnebago to procure twelve days’ rations and immediately return to the lakeside encampment. Yet, rather than follow their orders, two of the brigade commanders, Dodge and Henry, decided to launch an independent offensive after receiving information that Black Hawk’s British Band were in the vicinity of
Hustis’ Rapids on the upper Rock River. Employing several Winnebago Indians as guides, the two brigade commanders pushed their horsemen at a furious pace for three days through thick brush and marshy bogs only to discover that Black Hawk had abandoned the site and was once again on the move.  

Rather than abandon their pursuit, Dodge and Henry resumed their chase the following day after express riders sent to Atkinson’s headquarters stumbled upon the British Band’s trail. Counter to all intelligence thus far received regarding the intentions of Black Hawk, the trail discovered on July 18 indicated the Indians were not heading east, but were moving off to the west. Unbeknownst to Dodge, Henry, Atkinson, or any other American authorities, Black Hawk had decided to abandon his struggle to retain his homelands east of the Mississippi. In May the war leader learned that he could expect neither the British aid nor the support of other tribes to advance his rebellion. Furthermore, after months of almost constant movement, his people were also running short of provisions. Recognizing that his followers faced certain starvation, or death at the hands of the Americans if discovered, Black Hawk was leading his people in a desperate race to the Mississippi and the safety offered by its western banks.

For two days, the British Band stayed ahead of their pursuers as they raced across modern southern Wisconsin. Near twilight, on July 21, however, scouts from the militia brigades found the warriors Black Hawk had deployed as guards to protect his fleeing villagers as they crossed the Wisconsin River. As the sunlight faded, Black Hawk’s rear guard twice charged the hastily formed lines of the militiamen. Finally, as a heavy rain began to fall on the dimming battlefield, Dodge ordered his command to fix bayonets and charge. Under the pressure of the sudden counterattack, the defensive lines of the Indians broke and they began to fall back to the river. Dodge’s men, however, broke off their pursuit.
As the news of the Battle of Wisconsin Heights spread, settlers throughout the region rejoiced. It was the first successful engagement against Black Hawk’s warriors since Dodge and twenty men won a miner skirmish near the Pecatonica River on June 16. Yet, when Atkinson’s force reunited with Dodge and Henry near Blue Mound (in modern Wisconsin) on July 24, not everyone shared the enthusiasm voiced by civilians, Dodge, Henry, or the men who fought with them. Whereas the victorious militiamen boasted of their bravery and inflated the importance of the contest to levels that “Tippecanoe . . . might hang its head,” in Cooke’s opinion, they failed to recognize one significant shortcoming: they had not stopped Black Hawk. As Cooke scornfully noted: “After all their boasting, the simple fact was, that Black Hawk, although encumbered with the women, children, and baggage of his whole band, covering himself by a small party, had accomplished that most difficult of military operations, --to wit, the passage of a river, --in the presence of three regiments of American volunteers!” To make matters worse, since the engagement, neither commander had bothered to follow up on their victory by following the Indians. Presently, the only information that could be offered to Atkinson was that Black Hawk and his people were moving to the west.

On July 28, after spending days resupplying and reorganizing his army, Atkinson crossed the Wisconsin and resumed his pursuit of Black Hawk with a force of 1,300 regulars and mounted militia. Initially, the trail followed by Atkinson appeared as three parallel paths worn into the prairie and seemed “an ordinary road which had been traveled for years, wanting only the tracks of wheels.” Within days, however, the broad open prairies transformed into a series of near impenetrable obstacles that baffled the soldiers as to how Black Hawk’s followers could negotiate them. In his journal, Cooke noted: “Now followed a march over a country which we found to present almost insuperable difficulties to the passage of an army; a march which was
perhaps as trying to the perseverance and endurance of the troops, as some we read of as remarkable before and during the Revolutionary War, though, doubtless, surpassed by that ‘Hannibal of the West,’ General George Rogers Clark.” Another member of Atkinson’s army, Captain Henry Smith, was equally amazed by the treachery of the geography: “at one moment ascending hills, which appeared almost perpendicular; through the thickest forests; then plunging through morasses; fording to our necks, creeks and rivers; passing defiles, where a hundred resolute men might repulse thousands, whatever their courage or capacity; next clambering up and down mountains perfectly bald, without so much as a bush to sustain a man.” Still, in spite of the challenges the terrain presented, the members of Atkinson’s army were comforted by one simple and undeniable fact: they were overcoming the distance between Black Hawk and themselves.60

Yet, as the army neared the Indians, Cooke could not help but pity them for the miseries he knew the surviving members of the British Band were enduring. “I saw again all the evidence of suffering and starvation: --the corpses, not of warrior only, but of poor women, --lying as they fell by the trodden path.” Days later, Cooke added: “We saw several corpses—in every-day dress—lying by the trail in the open prairie; and where pack-horses had fallen exhausted, they had been slaughtered; and nothing but the hoof and the paunch were left.” It was becoming obvious to the young lieutenant that in spite the tales of the ferocious nature of Black Hawk and his warriors, he was desperately trying to avoid a battle in hopes of getting his people safely across the Mississippi. At several locations the terrain was well-suited for ambush, and as Cooke observed, a small force of warriors could have easily delayed Atkinson’s army. Yet no ambush came. The young officer could only surmise that Black Hawk was either too confident that he
could reach the Mississippi before being caught, or lacked the provisions to leave a large enough force behind to execute such rear guard actions.\textsuperscript{61}

By July 31, Atkinson’s army left the dense and torturous terrain and set off across the prairies of modern western Wisconsin. Information obtained from captives indicated the British Band was less than a day’s march ahead of Atkinson’s troops near the junction of Bad Axe River with the Mississippi. Pushing his command an incredible twenty-five miles on August 1, the commanding general permitted his soldiers but a few hours rest and left orders with commanders to have their troops prepared to resume their march at two o’clock in the morning. Atkinson once again divided his command into three columns for the assault on Black Hawk’s people. The general placed Henry’s brigade of horsemen on the left, the infantry would follow Dodge’s spy company in the center, and the mounted militia under the commands of Alexander and Posey would be on the far right.

At dawn, August 2, after marching a brief three miles, Cooke and the other infantrymen stood atop a bluff overlooking the shrouded valley of the Mississippi River. Dodge’s company had already vanished into the valley and the crack of musket fire could be heard, but no one could see the developing skirmish. Soon, however, orders came for the infantry to throw off their knapsacks and advance into the valley. The Indians were thought to be held up in a grove of trees near the river’s edge. Advancing by companies, the infantry trudged its way through muddy bottomland and moved into the woods, but found no warriors once they arrived.

Ordered to assume a defensive posture until the mounted militia units were in place. Cooke, who served as a staff officer with the infantry during the battle, grew impatient waiting for additional orders. As what “seemed an age” passed without new instructions arriving, he could hear the discharge of small arms to his left growing in intensity. Within moments it was
clear to the young officer that Dodge and Henry’s commands had stumbled upon the main line of resistance thrown up by Black Hawk. Yet, he remained frustrated that he and the other regular infantry units had yet to receive additional orders to join the fight.

Cooke, acting on his own accord, summoned his bugler and scouted a path that appeared to lead toward the river. When he arrived at the water’s edge, he learned that a number of warriors had forded the river and were “forted up” on an island. Receiving permission to strike the island, Cooke ordered his bugler to sound “Relieve Skirmishers” and took command of three companies that had been held in reserve. Lacking boats, Cooke and his soldiers plunged through the chest-deep river and onto the island, where they soon encountered the “incessant roar of small arms.” As the exchange intensified, the lieutenant was pleasantly startled by a series of shell bursts that fell within the Indians’ defensive positions. Cooke immediately seized the momentum, and with pistol and saber in hand, ordered his infantrymen to charge the Indians. The lieutenant’s bold action broke the Indians’ lines and brought the skirmish on the island to a successful conclusion.62

Although Black Hawk and a handful of his followers managed to escape, the Battle of Bad Axe River ended the Black Hawk War. An estimated 150 men, women, and children out of an estimated 500 remaining members of the British Band were killed during the engagement.63 Rather than pursue the survivors and continue the campaign, Atkinson loosed a force of Nakota warriors to inflict the final blows on Sauk refugees who fled across the Mississippi. They slaughtered another one hundred forty before Atkinson ended their chase as well. Black Hawk, Neapope, and the other leaders of the rebellions were later captured, sent east, and briefly imprisoned, before being allowed to return to Iowa and live out their days.64
Cooke had seen enough of the war as well. A few days after the battle, he, along with other members of the Sixth Infantry, embarked aboard the *Warrior* to return to Fort Crawford before going back to Jefferson Barracks. While his own racial chauvinism and professional pride prevented him from seeing his role in the sad drama as anything more than a necessary evil to subjugate the Indians, he was disgusted with the manner in which its successful conclusion had been reached. In particular, he was disgusted with the conduct of the militia and the brutalities inflicted on Black Hawk’s followers. In his opinion the militia had acted not merely as a disorganized and insubordinate mob but they had repeatedly demonstrated a bloodlust that made the young officer question who was actually the real savage in the struggle. During the campaign, Cooke had repeatedly heard of incidents in which militia troops had needlessly killed—murdered—captives from Black Hawk’s band. Reflecting on the number of women and children killed in the battle, he noted in his journal that he hoped they “fell by random shots,” or were unintentionally killed in the fog of battle. “But it is certain that a frontiersman is not particular,” he continued, “when his blood is up, and a redskin in his power.”

Such bloodlust astounded Cooke, but his harsh view of frontiersmen was reinforced during the voyage to Fort Crawford when a discharged militiaman began to shoot the corpses of Indians floating in the river for no other reason than to desecrate the body. Sadly, it was not the only episode of human depravity toward Black Hawk’s fallen people witnessed by Cooke. Following the battle both members of the militia and civilians repeated demonstrated the vile characteristics that Cooke believed were emblematic of the frontier society of Illinois. Cooke noted, for example, that before the *Warrior* left for Fort Crawford “a stray dentist from the East” appeared at the battlefield after the fighting ended with no other purpose than to gather a “rich harvest of teeth” from the Indian dead. The only conclusion Cooke could surmise for the man’s
actions was that he planned to sell the teeth. Writing in his journal years later, he added “doubtless some very fine Eastern personages now rejoice in savage ivories.” Then, during the voyage, when an orphaned child from the British Band was presented to a civilian doctor to have its broken arm and finger set, the doctor scoffed at the idea that the child was worthy of treatment.65

The dramatic contrast in attitudes between those held by Cooke and the Americans populating Illinois, Michigan Territory, and western regions of the country can be attributed to the divergent images Americans held of themselves. As a product of eastern society and education, Cooke undoubtedly shared many of the views of the West and westerners popularized by eastern artists and intellectuals like Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and others. The West stood as a new Eden and its Indian populations as unspoiled children of nature or noble savages. Yet, the settlers who had flooded into the region were seen in stark contrast. Instead of viewing western settlers as courageous pioneers who hewed their homes from the forests and brought civilization to the wilderness—as western settlers viewed themselves—they were, as one historian commented: “a crude, backward, unrefined lot who lived a low and slovenly and almost barbaric existence.” While Cooke certainly did not view all westerners in these terms, he undoubtedly attributed many of these characteristics to the men who formed the militia units during the Black Hawk War.66

In many respects, Cooke’s attitudes towards the militia were a greater reflection of his sudden awareness of the regular army’s value to the country. In the brief few years he had been on active duty, Cooke had been swept up in the romantic adventure of being a soldier: the camaraderie of camp life, the excitement of being part of a campaign, the drama of the frontier. Until the Black Hawk War, Cooke never seriously considered the regular army’s role in society
beyond the popular pronouncements that espoused traditional American doctrines of the
unfortunate necessity of a small professional army and the virtues of the citizen militia. Yet after
four months of serving alongside the militia, Cooke began to question the wisdom behind these
traditional sensibilities.

1 Philip St. George Cooke, Scenes and Adventures in the Army: or Romance of Military Life (Philadelphia: Linsay and
Blakston, 1859), 40. Also see Otis E. Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke (Glendale, Calif: Arthur H. Clark, 1955), 36-37
2 According to Young, it is extremely difficult to determine the exact number of children produced by the union of
Stephen and Catherine. There were perhaps as many as six sons and eight daughters, and of these, only three sons
and two daughters can be identified with certainty by surviving records. Young, Cooke, 21-22.
5 In 1823, cadets at the academy were obligated to five years of service, which consisted of four years as a cadet and
only one year on active duty. See Cunliffe, Soldiers and Civilians, 110.
7 Cunliffe, Soldiers and Civilians, 101 and 104-05
8 Cunliffe, Soldiers and Civilians, 129-134. Cunliffe cites an oft-quoted article from the Army & Navy Chronicle
that declared an officer commissioned as a second lieutenant at this period in the nineteenth century could expect to
be near retirement before being promoted to the rank of captain. The article continued that it would be virtually
impossible for that same second lieutenant attain the rank of major. In terms of pay, Cunliffe points out that an army
captain with twenty-years in the army declared in 1836 that the black cook working in his hotel’s kitchen made $11
dollars more per month. The captain’s pay was $64 each month. The “worth colored man in this Hotel,” made $75.
9 Young, Cooke, 19-24.
10 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 13-16.
11 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 16-17.
12 Francis Paul Prucha, Sword of the Republic: The United States Army on the Frontier, 1783-1846 (New York:
13 Kollbaum, Gateway to the West, 12-15.
14 Kollbaum, Gateway to the West, 22. Also see Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 170-82.
15 As quoted in Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 169-70.
16 Marc E. Killbaum, Gateway to the West: The History of Jefferson Barracks from 1826 – 1894, Vol. 1 (St. Louis:
17 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 18-19.
18 Kollbaum, Gateway to the West, 19. Also see Francis Paul Prucha, The Sword of the Republic: The United States
19 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 22-26, and Young, Cooke, 27-28.
Missouri Historical Society 9, no. 2 (January 1953): 127. Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 37-39; and Young, Cooke,
27-31.
21 Miller’s quoted in Otis E. Young, The First Military Escort on the Santa Fe Trail, 1829; from the Journal and
Reports of Major Bennett Riley and Lieutenant Philip St. George Cooke (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark, 1952),
34-35. Also see Young, Cooke, 33-36. For a detailed accounts of the troubles between the plains tribes and Santa
Fe traders, and of the subsequent military escort, see Otis E. Young, Military Escorts; Leo E. Oliva, Soldiers on the
Santa Fe Trail (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967); and Henry Inman, The Story of the Old Santa Fe Trail
(New York: Macmillan Company, 1899). An edited transcription of the Riley’s official report is contained in
The following year, Perrine’s transcription of the expedition’s official journal appeared under the same title in New
Black Hawk campaign. See Trask, battle to the imagined Indians. Still, it was yet another example of the undisciplined nature of the militia during the
49 surrender of the British Band. The unprovoked attack on his messengers, however, convinced the British Band's
demonstration of the traders caravan. He states that there were “only sixty men and thirty-six wagons.” See Young, Cooke, 38. Cooke also notes that due to the excessive cost of buying mules, Riley purchased oxen to pull many of the escort’s wagons. These oxen were the first to traverse the trail.
23 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 42.
24 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 42.
26 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 43, 60-61.
28 Inman, Old Santa Fe Trail, 87-88; Oliva, Soldiers, 29-30; Young, Cooke, 41-42; and Perrine, “Military Escorts,” 180-82. Also see Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 47-48.
29 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 51-53; Young, Cooke, 44-46; Oliva, Soldierl, 31; Perrine, “Military Escorts,” 183-86.
31 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 60-62.
32 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 83-84.
33 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 86-87.
34 Cantonment Leavenworth, which was established on May 8, 1827, was designated Fort Leavenworth on February 8, 1832. Robert W. Frazer, Forts of the West: Military Forts and Presidios, and Posts Commonly Called Forts, West of the Mississippi River to 1898 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 56.
35 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 94-95 and 109-10.
36 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 115 and 119.
37 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 94.
38 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 93-95. Also see Hamilton Gardner, “Romance at Old Cantonment Leavenworth,” Kansas Historical Quarterly 22, no. 2 (Summer, 1956), 102-3.
39 Young, Cooke, 55-56; and Gardner, “A Young West Pointer,” 132.
40 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 157-58; and Gardner, “Romance at Old Cantonment Leavenworth,” 104.
41 Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 213-14.
42 Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 214-15 and Trask, Black Hawk, 137-40. Black Hawk resisted all pleas for
cowboy and overtures of peace. Since the start of the controversy, he had allowed his contempt for Americans
to cloud his judgment. Rather than listen to the advocates of peace, Black Hawk accepted the foolhardy judgments of the Winnebago Prophet—who suggested the Americans were too cowardly to force the British band’s removal—and Neopope—another Sac chief who offered assurances that the British would supply arms and ammunition to the
Indians if attacked.
43 Cunliffe, Soldiers & Civilians, 128-29 and Trask, Black Hawk, 163-67 and 170-72.
44 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 158-59.
45 Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 221-22.
46 The great tragedy of the “battle” at Stillman’s Run was not merely the loss of life. As Trask and Purcha demonstrate, the Indians approaching militia’s camp had been sent by Black Hawk to open negotiations for the surrender of the British Band. The unprovoked attack on his messengers, however, convinced the British Band’s leader that the Americans were determined to make war upon his people. Trask, Black Hawk, 181-89; Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 222-23; and Young, Cooke, 60.
47 Trask, Black Hawk, 188-89 and Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 223-24.
48 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 156.
49 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 160. The disorganized flight of the militiamen was, at least, an attempt to give battle to the imagined Indians. Still, it was yet another example of the undisciplined nature of the militia during the Black Hawk campaign. See Trask, Black Hawk, 243-44.
50 Trask, Black Hawk, 243.
51 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 162-65.
52 Henry Smith, “Indian Campaign of 1832,” 160; Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 164-65; and Trask, Black Hawk, 250-51.
58 For details of the Battle of Pecatonica see Trask, *Black Hawk*, 233-35.
64 Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 188 and Prucha, *Sword of the Republic*, 230-31. Cooke places the number of British Band members killed by the Nakota at 140. Prucha stated that the Nakota only collected 68 scalps before returning home.
66 Trask, *Black Hawk*, 166-70.
When Cooke reached Fort Leavenworth in the fall of 1832, he felt lucky to be alive. While awaiting orders to return to his home garrison, he was exposed to an outbreak of Asiatic cholera at Fort Armstrong. Although he initially managed to avoid the deadly epidemic, almost constant exposure to it at the post took its toll on his immune system, and within hours of boarding the steamer that was to take him to St. Louis, he began to exhibit symptoms of the disease. In his journal, Cooke sarcastically recalled: “the accursed disease seemed to have spared me . . . when there was a chance of medical aid, only to seize me when there was none.” Acting quickly, before the effects of the disease overpowered him, Cooke managed to secure a small quantity of calomel before being forced to retreat to his bunk for the duration of the journey. Then, when he arrived in St. Louis, he happened upon a doctor who quickly administered two “immoderate” doses of the same drug. Weakened, but fortunate to be alive, the impatient Cooke left St. Louis after only a couple of days rest and booked passage on a steamer bound for Fort Leavenworth.¹

By late October, Cooke finally returned to Fort Leavenworth and the welcoming embrace of his wife, Rachel. Yet, the weary lieutenant had little time to enjoy his homecoming. New orders also awaited his arrival. After learning of Cooke’s actions on the island during the Battle of Bad Axe River, General Atkinson appointed the lieutenant adjutant of the Sixth Infantry and transferred him to regimental headquarters at Jefferson Barracks. More changes, however, were in store.

As the Cookes settled into their new quarters during the winter, Congress began debating the merits of reestablishing a mounted branch of service in the regular army. It had been a
frequent topic of discussion throughout the previous decade but American prejudices against mounted troops as being too aristocratic—and expensive—kept any legislation from being seriously considered. Yet, as the line of settlement pushed farther westward and intrepid entrepreneurs continued to follow pathways into the Far West, the clamor for mounted troops to protect commerce on the frontier grew increasingly louder. Growing populations in western states also fueled demands for protection. The root cause of the Black Hawk War, for example, rested in the unchecked spread of the state’s white population into lands formerly claimed by the Sac and Fox tribes. In 1820, only 55,221 whites lived in the Illini State. By 1830, the population had nearly tripled and stood at 157,445. Furthermore, in wake of the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the government assumed the added responsibility of not only protecting its citizens living on the edge of western settlement from the mounted warrior societies of the Great Plains but also of protecting the Indian tribes removed from the East and settled in Indian Territory.²

The call for a cavalry force was loudest from western representatives, especially the elected officials from Missouri, which had become the headquarters for several fur trading companies as well as firms plying the Santa Fe trade. Arguing for the protection of the state’s expanding lines of western commerce Senator Thomas Hart Benton was among the most vocal proponents of a mounted cavalry force, and in 1831, secured the authorization for a battalion of six companies of mounted infantry, or Rangers. To spare his fellow lawmakers the onus of increasing the size and expense of the army, the rank and file of the battalion would be composed of one-year civilian volunteers who would furnish their own arms and horses and be paid a dollar a day for their service. Benton proposed the outfit as stopgap measure, believing the rangers could patrol the frontier, particularly the Santa Fe Trail, where infantry troops already had
demonstrated their inability to cow the mounted warriors, while sparing his countrymen the burden of paying for regulars or the discomfort of increasing the size of the army. In the few months that the Ranger Battalion existed, however, its less-than-military character and the incredible costs required for its operations convinced many in Washington that its role could be better and more efficiently filled by a regiment of regular cavalry. Secretary of War Lewis Cass believed a regiment of dragoons could accomplish the same goals assigned the Ranger Battalion for $153,932 less each year. Of greater significance, as members of the regular army served five-year terms of enlistment, dragoons would not suffer the loss of personnel annually faced by the Rangers.  

Congress finally passed a bill “for the more perfect defense of the frontier,” that authorized a permanent body of mounted troops, the First Regiment of United States Dragoons, in December. President Jackson signed it into law on March 2, 1833. The principle mission assigned to the dragoons would be to patrol the western prairies and plains and to impress the region’s tribes with the martial power of the United States. The new regiment was to be composed of 1,832 total officers and men divided into ten companies.

The new dragoon regiment immediately appealed to Cooke, and in February, he eagerly penned a letter to Secretary Cass to request a transfer. An appointment into the dragoons offered opportunities for increased rank and pay, as well as the promise of adventure on the frontier that he had desired since receiving his commission. In addition Cooke’s experiences in recent years made clear that the army’s role in pacifying the West, especially in terms of its dealings with Indians, would require it to move greater distances, with greater speed from its eastern bases than ever before considered. His experiences against the Comanche along the Santa Fe Trail and against Black Hawk’s warriors also made it evident that a cavalry force was essential to the
Successful completion of the army’s frontier mission. As Cooke reluctantly acknowledged, it had been the army’s lack of horses that had allowed the Comanche to go unpunished for their depredations along the Santa Fe Trail in 1829, just as it had been the horses employed by Black Hawk’s people that had allowed them to outmaneuver Atkinson’s army throughout the previous summer. The success of Dodge and Henry’s mounted militia troops during the Black Hawk campaign could also be attributed to the speed offered by their horses. Furthermore, a cavalry force of regulars, commanded by trained officers of the regular army, would do much to eliminate the murderous tendencies of civilian soldiers witnessed by Cooke during the Black Hawk conflict. In Cooke’s opinion, militia troops were motivated too much by their own selfish interests—generally the acquisition of Indian land—to be trusted to act dispassionately in matters involving Indians. Professional soldiers, on the other hand, were motivated only by their desires to carry out their orders and enforce the will of their government. As Cooke would later declare:

An irregular, ill-armed force, composed of individuals who have never acknowledged the common restraints of society; who confound insubordination with a boasted equality; who cannot endure the wholesome actions of discipline, or even obedience, cannot be considered comparable for these objects, with a force whose perfect discipline insures an absence of all offensive irregularities, whose complete and perfect arms are the tokens of strength; whose accurate evolutions, responding to a guiding will, are emblematic of power; whose very uniforms have an imposing moral effect, investing them to Indian eyes, with the character of direct representatives of a great nation which they dread. 6

The army approved Cooke’s request. On March 5, 1833, Secretary Cass signed Cooke’s orders and appointed him the senior first lieutenant in the new regiment. Seventeen other officers were also appointed on the same date. Henry Dodge, the heroic militia commander from Black Hawk’s War and the Ranger Battalion’s commanding officer, was named the regiment’s colonel. Major Steven Watts Kearny, a veteran officer with more than twenty years service, was
appointed lieutenant colonel. The other officers appointed to the new regiment were a mixture of regular army veterans, West Point graduates, and officers from the deactivated Ranger Battalion. Due to the growing antagonism against professional soldiers in the “Age of the Common Man,” the appointments for several officers reflected political concerns harbored by the Jackson Administration that it did not appear to favor privileged West Pointer over those possessing natural abilities. It was a fateful decision. Tension between professional and amateur officers would disrupt the new regiment for several years.7

After receiving his transfer, Cooke hoped to spend the summer visiting his and Rachel’s families back east. He had not returned home since receiving his commission six years earlier, and he undoubtedly looked forward to a long furlough. The Army, however, had other plans. Each of the officers assigned to the dragoons received orders during the late spring to begin recruiting the enlisted men who would serve as privates in the regiment. To ensure the dragoons did not have a sectional bias, officers were dispatched throughout the country to recruit young men between twenty and thirty-five years of age that were approximately five feet eight inches in height and possessed outstanding moral character. To underline the dragoon’s elite status, Congress reserved its ranks for native-born whites only.8

Although disappointed at the denial of his furlough, Cooke left Rachel at Jefferson Barracks and set off to recruit the sons of western Tennessee. It was a duty he immediately detested. Throughout the antebellum period, the army never established a policy to systematically replenish its ranks. Each unit was responsible for recruiting the men who would fill its individual company rosters. For the infantry regiments and artillery battalions already in service, the need to recruit new soldiers typically required officers to travel to designated parts of the country to man recruiting offices in larger cities or hold enlistment fairs in rural areas. While
Cooke might dislike the assignment, it was an essential component of an officer’s duty. Furthermore, in spite of Cooke’s complaints, it was a duty for which he demonstrated a particular talent. Still, his intolerance for the crude manners and course habits of his less sophisticated countrymen prevented him from enjoying the experience. He thought the country through which he traveled to be “ragged and barren,” and laced with so many stony hills and hollows that he found it difficult to follow maps and directions provided by locals to get him to his next recruitment site. When he registered for a room at a tavern in Perryville, Cooke snidely noted that the proprietor afforded him quite the mark of distinction. The tavern keeper “duly installed” Cooke in a “separate chamber,” or private room for the duration of his stay. The accommodations marked the lieutenant as a man of prominence simply because he was spared the inconvenience of sharing a room—and possibly a bed—with another guest.⁹

Still, as Cooke discovered during his travels, the prospect of exploring “far and wide the Western Territory,” and bearing “the arms of the Union into the country of many Indian tribes,” proved irresistible for the “enterprising and roving disposition of many fine young men . . . in that military State.” Although Cooke never addressed the subject directly, his efforts were likely aided by growing rumors concerning the elite status of the new regiment. Across the nation newspaper editors, local dignitaries, and even some of the recruiting officers, led prospective enlistees to believe that the rank and file of the dragoons would not only wear fine new uniforms and complete their terms of service from horseback, they were informed that they would enjoy the same status of West Point cadets. The rumor mills insisted enlisted dragoons would not be subjected to the harsh discipline, fatigue duties, or the intense labors to which the rank and file serving in the army’s other service branches were so notoriously subjected. Regardless of their source of inspiration, whether it was the tantalizing rumors or a genuine desire for western
adventure, Cooke discovered many of his recruits were so enthusiastic that even his efforts to convey the “discouraging particulars” of military life could not dissuade prospective recruits from volunteering. Although he met “indifferent success” in Columbia, Dover, and Clarksville, and was thoroughly disappointed by the turn out in Reynoldsburgh, by the time he reached Jackson, Tennessee—where he witnessed the election of “the celebrated Davy Crockett” to congress—the new dragoon officer had filled his recruitment quota. His recruits, the men who would form C Company, rendezvoused with him in Nashville to make the voyage to St. Louis.10

When Cooke returned to Jefferson Barracks, where the dragoons were headquartered, any lingering frustrations from his recruiting trip immediately faded. While he was away, Rachel had given birth to their first child: a son named John Rogers.11 Yet, in a short time, professional aggravations eroded Cooke’s personal happiness. From the start, Cooke and the other officers encountered serious obstacles to organizing the First Dragoons. The organization of the regiment posed unique problems for the army; problems that were made worse by the hurried manner in which congress and the army brought the regiment to life. The end result was that as the weeks passed, morale within the regiment plummeted. Recruits arriving at the post throughout the summer and early fall discovered the army had not only failed to secure horses, it had failed to deliver such essential materials as weapons, ordinance, equipment, and uniforms. So unprepared was the army for the arrival of the new dragoons, it had yet to refurbish the barracks and other facilities at Jefferson Barracks that had been stripped nearly clean by Sixth Infantry troops after the post was decommissioned as the army’s School of Infantry Practice. The new dragoons discovered some of barracks lacked bunks and stoves, and in some cases, their barren kitchens were not resupplied until their pay had been levied to purchase it.
Under these stark conditions, morale sank further as the new enlisted men adjusted to the realities of a soldier’s life. Those believing they would hold the same status as West Point cadets, or that they would not be subjected to the physical labors or harsh discipline of the infantry, soon discovered the extent of their delusions. In addition to the numerous fatigue duties soldiers performed while in garrison, the new dragoons were immediately set to building their respective company stables or detailed across the Mississippi River to cut the timber they would need for their construction projects. The new dragoons also discovered that they were subject to the same rigid standards of military discipline that all enlisted men in the U.S. Army faced. Soldiers that were derelict in their duties, found intoxicated or otherwise in breach of regulations were arrested, placed in the guardhouse, and subjected to court-martial. Punishments for these offenses ran the gambit from fines and loss of rank, to confinement, or walking “the tow-path all day with a bag of shot on their shoulders.” On one occasion, the entire regiment was turned out to witness the administration of fifty lashes with a cat-o’-nine-tails on the bare back of a soldier convicted of desertion. In spite of the draconian punishments, arrests and court-martials became commonplace, and by mid-October, over a hundred enlisted men and noncommissioned officers had deserted the post.12

Adding to the frustrations of Cooke and the other officers, no formal program of instruction to train the recruits existed and none of the regiment’s officers were familiar with the cavalry arts. It was a little “astonishing,” noted Cooke, that “our government should have so long deprived the country and the army of the services of so very important an arm as the cavalry; that it should have suffered all knowledge and experience of its organization, equipment, and manoeuvres to become extinct.”13 Initially, officers orchestrated a bit of a subterfuge by instructing their companies in the manual of arms and basic infantry tactics. A
few officers had likely secured copies of two foreign cavalry manuals and had begun the work of translating the text to begin learning the theory, tactics, and formations, as well as devising drills their troops would conduct.14 Yet, it would be October before the first horses arrived, and then, only enough animals were delivered to mount three of the five companies present at Jefferson Barracks. When the mounted companies began to drill with their horses, the formations they executed were largely the results of the experiments developed from hurried translations and hasty instructions. Those developing the exercises typically instructed the officers and noncoms during morning drills that would, in turn, instruct the enlisted troops during afternoon drill.

It was a haphazard and potentially dangerous beginning for the regiment. Cooke, for instance, objected to the demands that the dragoons build stables and complete other construction projects at Jefferson Barracks in light of the tremendous undertaking of organizing the new regiment. In Cooke’s opinion, requiring the recruits to labor about the post was “impracticable,” and resulted in a “total loss of their services.” To execute the mission for which the regiment had been created, the dragoons would be required to confront Indians of a different character than those known in the East. The new recruits needed to learn how to care for their horses, accoutrements and arms, as well as the formations and the tactics of mounted service, and because they would also be expected to fight on foot, the recruits were instructed in infantry tactics. Congress, however, did not share Cooke’s views on the importance of preparation and training. In November, Congress exacerbated the situation confronting the dragoons by ordering the War Department to transfer the dragoons from Jefferson Barracks to Fort Gibson in Indian Territory!15

It was an order that defied logic. The army had yet to supply the regiment with the basic materials and equipment it needed to function as a military unit. No uniforms had been
delivered, leaving the rank and file of the regiment still wearing the civilian attire in which they had arrived at Jefferson Barracks—which after months of active duty had become quite threadbare. The quartermasters department had yet to furnish enough horses to mount all five companies, and the ordnance department had not supplied the dragoons with proper weaponry. Thus far, the dragoons had been forced to train with condemned muskets secured from the St. Louis arsenal. While these relics served the purposes of drill exercises on the parade grounds of Jefferson Barracks, they were hardly functional and certainly not conducive for use from horseback. As one chronicler noted, the muskets could “neither be aimed nor fired.” Years later, Cooke still fumed at the army’s rationale for the transfer: “There had been assigned, as the only and great motive, that the corps having been raised for the defense of the frontier, would be disbanded if it remained inactive so far in the interior as Jefferson Barracks.”

On November 20, 1833, Colonel Dodge led five raw dragoon companies, poorly equipped and under-trained, on a torturous five-hundred mile march over the Ozark Plateau. Although Dodge managed to gather together enough uniforms to clothe the dragoons making the trek, the materials issued were hardly uniform. The dragoons left Jefferson Barracks wearing garments of military origins, but of no set pattern or color and no guarantee against the coming winter. Fortunately, the first weeks of the march passed without incident. As the dragoons crossed through the rolling, wooded hill country of central Missouri toward the Osage branch of the Gasconade River, the weather remained fair. Officers used the march as an opportunity to continue instructing their companies. The dragoons continued to learn the proper procedures for establishing camp; the increased need to ensure proper grazing, grooming and picketing of their stock; as well as, the necessity of properly caring for their equipment during an expedition. Each morning at reveille, and every evening after a campsite had been selected, the dragoons stood for
roll call and inspection. Then each company erected their two-man shelters in double rows to form one side of a hollow rectangle or parallelogram to permit the baggage and supply wagons to be parked and the animals picketed. Company squads were divided into details to collect wood, prepare meals, and stand guard. For the members of the three mounted companies, the officers stressed the necessity of properly caring for their animals before administering to their own needs. Each evening when the battalion bivouacked, the horses had to be fed and groomed before their riders could enjoy the comforts of a warm fire and hot meal.

On November 25, the fortunes of the dragoons changed as snows began to fall. Soon the temperatures followed suit, and a trial of miseries commenced. Men suffered from exposure and inadequate clothing, and the horses grew hungry as fodder became increasingly difficult to find. Years later, Cooke recalled the next few weeks as days spent enduring subzero temperatures, rancid rations, and deficient equipment. The increasingly weary battalion members continued to press on through the inclement weather, passing through the frontier town of Fayetteville, Arkansas, before finally crossing the Illinois River into Indian Territory.

Finally, on December 17, the dragoons reached their destination. Yet, as Fort Gibson was occupied by members of the Seventh Infantry, the dragoons had little choice but to endure continued hardships. Establishing a temporary bivouac a few miles below the post on the Neosho, or Grand River, called Camp Sandy, the dragoons were immediately tasked with building the shelters and stables that would house the regiment once assembled. The dragoons, however, were poor carpenters. The barracks they constructed offered little comfort against the season. Roofs leaked and the walls did little to prevent the wind and cold from seeping into the interiors. Fortunately a great supply of buffalo robes was available for the luckless dragoons to cover their tack equipment and to keep their sleeping areas dry.
The battalion’s horses fared little better. Corn requisitioned before the battalion left Jefferson Barracks had yet to arrive at Fort Gibson because a six-inch thick sheet of ice had formed on the Grand River and stopped all traffic. With few alternatives, the animals were turned out to graze on the cane and brush available in nearby stream bottoms until the weather broke and proper forage could be secured.\textsuperscript{18}

When spring finally arrived in Indian Territory, the dragoons learned of the extent of their government’s ignorance surrounding the demands of properly organizing, equipping, and training a new regiment of dragoons. The full complement of enlisted men—those who would fill the ranks of the remaining five companies—had yet to arrive at Fort Gibson, when orders arrived directing Colonel Dodge to lead a reconnaissance some 250 miles into the Red River country of the Comanche and Pawnee Pict Indians. These tribesmen had yet to recognize the authority of the United States in any formalized treaties, and authorities in Washington believed it essential that the dragoons penetrate their respective territories with a display of restrained strength to cultivate respect for the government.\textsuperscript{19}

The orders, in Cooke’s estimation, were yet another decision made by ignorant civilian and military authorities. It had only been in the last few weeks, since the dragoons’ new uniforms arrived at Camp Sandy—renamed Camp Jackson—that the new horse soldiers began to look like real soldiers. Moreover, the regiment’s officers had only recently started to instruct their companies in proper cavalry formations and drills. Cooke and the other officers had passed the winter translating foreign cavalry manuals and developing experimental drills suitable for company and regimental maneuvers. Yet, the regiment was without the carbines that had been especially designed for use on horseback, and the pistols and sabers distributed among the regiment were of a “very rough, inferior quality.”\textsuperscript{20}
Still, in spite of the dragoons’ lingering shortcomings, the plans for the expedition proceeded. In late April, General Henry Leavenworth, recently installed commander of the Western Division, arrived at Fort Gibson and ordered trails to the False Washita River cut for the establishment of a forward base. Leavenworth intended to launch the expedition on May 1, but as that date approached, it became clear that the expedition would not proceed as planned. Low water in the Arkansas River delayed the arrival of much needed supplies and the balance of the regiment was more than a week away from starting its march from Jefferson Barracks.

On June 2, Lieutenant Colonel Kearny led two of the long expected companies recruited over the winter into Camp Jackson. The balance of the winter battalion, however, did not arrive until June 12. Properly uniformed and equipped, and able to execute basic mounted drills, the latecomers of Companies F, G, H, I, and K cut fine figures on the parade field before General Leavenworth, but in Cooke’s estimation they were “quite unprepared for the expedition.” They, like the other members of their regiment, were immediately tossed into the chaotic flurry of activities still being conducted in preparation for the impending march.21

On June 15, after the overdue supplies were received and packed into the wagons, and the dragoons were properly outfitted and assembled, Leavenworth passed the order to Colonel Dodge to proceed to the forward camp on the False Washita River.22 Joining the nearly 500 dragoons were a number of civilians: Indian Commissioner Montfortd Stokes, celebrated artist George Catlin, and Carl Beyrich, a Prussian botanist. Yet, before the expedition could begin its march to the Red River country, it would have to endure another delay until the Osage, Cherokee, Delaware, and Seneca Indians hired as scouts and interpreters arrived. The expedition did not leave the False Washita until June 21.
The accumulated delays were to have disastrous consequences for the dragoons. In the nearly seven weeks that lapsed between the expedition’s planned launch date, May 1, and the date it actually commenced, June 21, the temperatures rose to insufferable levels and transformed the southern plains into what Cooke described as a “sea of fire.” Temperatures as high as 105° had been recorded before leaving Camp Jackson, and as the dragoons advanced along the southern bank of the Arkansas River toward the forward camp, there were no indications to suggest an end to the heat wave. Under the scorching summer sun, the southern plains of modern Oklahoma dried and withered. The dragoons suffered equally. Dressed in thick wool uniforms over flannel long-johns, and weighted down by weapons, belts, buckles, and ammunition, the horse soldiers began falling from their saddles within days of their first march. Before the expedition reached the forward camp, which was only twenty miles distant, twenty-three dragoons were sent back to Fort Gibson due to failing health. Days later, on July 1, another forty-five enlisted men and three officers were listed on the sick rolls. By Independence Day, as the expedition encamped along the “true” Washita River, approximately 100 miles out from Camp Jackson, so many were suffering the ill-effects of exposure that a sick camp had to be established and the expedition had to be halted and reorganized.

Aware that word of their movements likely had spread among the regions nomadic tribes, Leavenworth was unwilling to risk the loss of face that the dragoons would have suffered from the failure of their maiden patrol. Rather than order the dragoons to collect sick and dying and return to Camp Jackson, the division commander ordered Dodge to forge ahead with the healthiest members of his regiment. Dodge proceeded with 252 men, reorganized into six companies consisting of forty-two men each. A total of one hundred and nine dragoons, including the 86 listed on the hospital rolls, were left behind. Leavenworth, with the two
companies of Seventh Infantry composing his escort, would follow with the sick at a greatly reduced pace.\textsuperscript{23}

Cooke was among those left in the sick camp along the Washita. Yet, within days, he and the other infirmed dragoons were moved to new camp established at Cross Timbers to accommodate an additional number of soldiers from Dodge’s reduced column who had fallen ill since leaving the river. Alarmingly, Leavenworth was among those suddenly unable to continue. Recalling memories of the expedition, Cooke later wrote, “Nature would seem to have conspired with an imbecile military administration for the destruction of the regiment.” In addition to obvious cases of heat exhaustion and sun stroke, many among the sick also suffered unnatural fevers—likely brought on by bites from swarms of mosquitoes hatched in the stagnate pools of drying streams that cut through the countryside. Scores of men died, including Leavenworth who succumbed to the mysterious fever afflicting the expedition on July 21.\textsuperscript{24}

Under the protective care of Lieutenant Colonel Kearny, the sick and dying remained at the Cross Timbers camp until late August. In the meantime, Dodge soldiered on with his column of approximately 180 dragoons. In spite of the fact that his men continued to fall victim to illness and exposure to the sun, the dragoon colonel managed to make contact with the Comanche and Pawnee Picts by mid-July. Professing his government’s desire for friendship, Dodge invited the chiefs to return to Washington to negotiate treaties and formalize the new relationship. The colonel promised the government would send traders that would bring the Indians guns, blankets, and other items the tribesmen valued. To convince the chiefs of his sincerity, Dodge returned two teenaged Indian girls, a Kiowa and a Pawnee, captured earlier by the Osage. His gestures succeeded. Not only did the chiefs agree to go to Fort Gibson, they returned a captive white boy named Mathew Martin.\textsuperscript{25}
By September, the decimated regiment reassembled at Camp Jackson to convalesce. Yet, the dragoons found little comfort at their home station. The sun continued its unrelenting assault on the land and consistently sent temperatures well-above the century mark. Adding to the discomfort, the facilities at Camp Jackson were too few and too primitive to accommodate the sick. Stricken soldiers were left to languish under tents erected on the parade ground and they were joined daily by other who became ill once they returned. All suffered immeasurably. In total, over 100 enlisted men from the dragoons and the infantry died as a result of their participation in the expedition. Still, the expedition was deemed a success. Contact with the Comanche and Pawnee Pict had been established, and as expected, the tribes were sufficiently awed by the appearance of the soldiers on horseback.26

The dragoons, however, received no respite. In September, the War Department scattered the regiment. On September 3, Lieutenant Colonel Kearny led three companies up the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Des Moines River to occupy a newly established post with the same name. Major Richard B. Mason and three companies—including Cooke’s K Company—remained along the Arkansas River in Indian Territory. Colonel Dodge and four companies marched to the western border of Missouri and went into garrison at Fort Leavenworth. In his journal, Cooke stated the division of the regiment was a mixed blessing. Although separated by hundreds of miles along the western frontier, he and the other officers were afforded a few idle months “to invent and practice as many different systems of tactics and duty” as they could devise from their study of foreign cavalry manuals. It was practice the regiment sorely needed, as civil and military authorities intended the dragoons to begin executing the missions for which they had been created as soon as possible. During the summer of 1835, Dodge and Kearny launched expeditions from their respective outposts intending to lead their
dragoons into Indian Territory in efforts to build on the success of the previous summer. In June, Kearny and 170 dragoons moved up the Des Moines River toward the Raccoon Fork before turning his command northeast to seek out the Eastern Sioux of Chief Wabasha. From Fort Leavenworth, Dodge and 120 dragoons marched to the Platte River and followed its southern banks until they came in sight of the Rocky Mountains. The dragoon column then turned south, skirted the Front Range in modern Colorado, and returned to Fort Leavenworth along the Santa Fe Trail.²⁷

To Cooke’s great regret, he did not participate in any of the dragoon expeditions in 1835. During the fall, after he recovered from his illness, the War Department dispatched him to Carlisle Barracks, a recruitment depot in south-central Pennsylvania. Although recruiting duty in the Mid-Atlantic region of the country allowed him to return to his home state for the first time in seven years, recruiting remained a disagreeable task—one that he had no compunction against informing the War Department. In the spring of 1835, after only a few months in the east, Cooke wrote the adjutant general requesting to be sent back to the frontier and his company. Cooke, however, remained in the East.

Cooke, of courses, did what he could to lessen the tedium of his assignment. In the spring he brought Rachel and John Rogers to Carlisle Barracks for a brief stay. Its proximity to Philadelphia, Leesburg, and Washington allowed for a pleasant visit with friends and family. In May, Cooke’s disposition improved briefly when he received word that he had been promoted to captain following the resignation of Captain Jesse Bean. Cooke also gained admission to the Virginia Bar Association in the fall. But the tour of duty in the East was becoming interminable, and in February 1836, he once again wrote the War Department requesting to be returned to his company: “I request to be relieved from the recruiting service, and to be ordered to join my
regiment . . . I have been absent from it nearly two years, and more than a year on this service . . .
I believe it would be very injurious to me to miss another spring expedition . . .”28

In May 1836, the War Department finally granted Cooke’s request and returned him to his company. Yet, Cooke’s frustrations were not at an end. When he inherited Bean’s captaincy, Cooke also inherited Bean’s command: K Company. Cooke objected to the assignment because he wished to remain in the company he had raised two years earlier. Secondly, and more importantly, the captain hoped to avoid duty at Fort Towson on the southern plains where K Company was posted. Instead, he hoped to be reassigned to C Company, which was posted at Fort Leavenworth—where he believed he could escape the ravages of the sicknesses that seemed so prevalent at the southern outposts. Cooke was already well-aware of the health risks garrison duty in Indian Territory presented, and during his absence in the East, the death toll of soldiers from miasmal diseases confirmed his worries.29 All of Cooke’s requests to be assigned to another company were refused, and he reluctantly reported to duty at Camp Benton—the dragoon outpost attached to Fort Towson.

Yet, for the adventure-craving captain, the timing of his arrival could not have been better. In July, General Edmund P. Gaines, commander of the Western Department, ordered Companies E and F, as well as Cooke’s Company K, to march with six companies of the Seventh Infantry to Nacogdoches, Texas, to guard the international border between the newly independent Republic of Texas and Louisiana. Since April, when Gaines arrived in New Orleans, rumors warning that Mexican agents were encouraging Indian uprisings throughout eastern Texas and Louisiana had grown steadily, and convinced of their validity, the department commander believed the presence of the additional nine companies were essential to the region’s security.30
The dragoons marched out of Camp Benton on July 8, 1836, and arrived in Nacogdoches nineteen days later. Given the tone of impending hostilities with the Indians contained in Gaines’ dispatches, the members of the expedition undoubtedly expected to be hurled into combat soon after reaching their destination. Once in Texas, however, the troops discovered the information received by the department commander had been greatly exaggerated. Intelligence gathered by the troops patrolling the supposedly threatened region consistently clashed with the reports issued by Gaines as no evidence of intended hostilities was discovered. Rather than repelling hostile warriors, Cooke and his dragoon comrades passed the balance of the summer repelling only hordes of insects, while also battling the heat and humidity of the pine-forested region of east Texas. By November, Lieutenant Colonel William Whistler of the Seventh Infantry, commanding Camp Nacogdoches, wrote to Gaines’ replacement, Colonel Matthew Arbuckle, to complain of the unhealthful conditions at the outpost and to inquire of the necessity of keeping the troops in Texas. Arbuckle agreed. In December, the dragoons and their infantry counterparts were ordered to return to their home garrisons in Indian Territory. Cooke and the dragoons reached Camp Benton on December 26.\(^{31}\)

As the New Year began the First Regiment of United States Dragoons was entering a new phase in its brief history. In 1836, command of the regiment passed to Stephen Watts Kearny following the resignation of Henry Dodge who had accepted the governorship of the newly organized Wisconsin Territory. Under Kearny’s leadership, the dragoons would undergo significant change. Since the organization of the regiment, one of the consistent complaints voiced concerned the divergent attitudes of Dodge and Kearny regarding matters of military discipline, training, and the manner in which the unit would execute its mission. Whereas Dodge was a brave and gallant officer, possessing the natural skill and ability to lead men, he was not a
professional soldier. Dodge, like so many of the regiment’s original officers, was a product of
the militia system where troop discipline and training suffered as a result of the familiarity
between the officers and the enlisted men. Kearny, on the other hand, was the consummate
professional. Once Kearny assumed command, he immediately took steps to recast the character
of the regiment and redefine the manner in which it would carry out its mission.

Austere in character and personality, over the course of his twenty-four year career, the
forty-two year old Kearny had earned a well-deserved reputation as a stern disciplinarian. He
rigidly adhered to regulations and held those serving under his command to the same unwavering
standards. He viewed training and drill as absolute necessities for inculcating soldiers with the
discipline he believed essential for them to execute their duties. During the War of 1812, and no
doubt throughout his subsequent career, he witnessed the ineffectiveness of militia units because
officers were unwilling or incapable of enforcing military discipline due to their familiarity with
their soldiers.

Once Kearny assumed command, he immediately took steps to recast the character of the
regiment. He would not brook the relaxed discipline and inconsistent training regimens tolerated
by his predecessor. Once in residence at Fort Leavenworth, the regiment’s headquarters, Kearny
determined the fort would also serve as the regiment’s training center. He rotated the regiment’s
companies into the post to ensure their levels of training and discipline met his rigid standards.
Kearny also ended the practice of gathering the regiment for extensive patrols of the frontier.
Instead, he dispatched individual companies or small squadrons from their respective garrisons
as needed. The new approach to the regiment’s mission allowed Kearny to retain the companies
that needed more extensive training in garrison, while also permitting him to deploy the more
thoroughly trained and disciplined troops when necessary. Kearny’s strategy not only ensured a
more systematic and uniform training program, but also permitted him to maintain a military presence along the frontier by way of the short escorts and patrols made by his horse soldiers. It was an impressive accomplishment. With slightly more than six hundred dragoons at his disposal, the regiment’s new colonel managed to ensure peace along a frontier that extended from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico.32

For reasons lost to history, neither Cooke nor his company participated in any of the short missions conducted by the dragoons in 1837. While purely speculative, several plausible reasons exist to explain why the young captain and his company were seemingly overlooked. Having returned from Texas at the start of the year, it is not unreasonable to imagine Company K was simply afforded an opportunity to rest, recover, and train. It is also possible, given the sudden priority placed on training by the regiment’s commanding officer, that Cooke was held in garrison to refine the drill exercises used to train the regiment. It is equally possible that as the summer months arrived on the southern plains, Cooke’s health prevented his company from taking the field. In a letter written to the adjutant general later in the year, Cooke noted that between August 1 and November 17, he endured five separate attacks of fever. Cooke had most likely contracted malaria in 1834, and for decades to come the disease would periodically play havoc with his health.

During the summer of 1838, while wracked with fever and hallucinations, he accidentally shot Rachel in the face. She survived, but the ball severely damaged her lower jaw and cost her several teeth. Desperate to secure proper medical treatment for his wife once he recovered from his illness, Cooke immediately requested leave so that he might take her east to be treated by a surgeon-dentist. Yet, a shortage of officer at Fort Gibson—due to illness and detached service—prevented Cooke’s departure for the post until after start of the New Year, and then, rather than
grant the captain medical leave for his family, he was assigned to recruiting duty and posted at Carlisle Barracks once again. Although Rachel finally received the medical treatment she needed, in late 1838 her husband fell ill once again. They would not return to Indian Territory until near the end of 1839.33

After nearly two years of separation, Cooke rejoined his company at the recently established Fort Wayne. Located on the Illinois River in Indian Territory, the new post stood half way between Forts Gibson and Smith, and was already gaining a reputation as an unhealthy environment. In addition, several whisky shops had sprouted up beyond the fort’s campus.34 Fortunately for the captain and his growing family, their stay would be brief. Due to a squabble that erupted between Colonel Kearny and General Matthew Arbuckle, Fort Wayne’s garrison—E, F, and K Companies—were transferred to Fort Leavenworth. The transfer also provided an opportunity for Kearny to extricate Cooke from a rather delicate situation that had developed at Fort Wayne.

Shortly after Cooke’s arrival at the new outpost, he failed to properly record the results of a troop muster and inspection. The captain made the situation worse by refusing to obey an order from Major Richard B. Mason to manufacture the results. Cooke’s refusal initiated a squabble between the two officers that ultimately resulted in his arrest. Although typical of the petty squabbles that frequently erupted between officers, the feud immediately placed Kearny in the unenviable position of potentially losing two valued officers in his regiment. If he displayed too much favoritism toward Cooke by ordering the matter dropped, Kearny risked losing Mason through resignation or a possible transfer request. If Kearny allowed the court-martial to proceed, he could potentially lose the capable young captain. Moreover, in an effort to escape Mason’s continued harassment, Cooke applied for a transfer to the newly formed Judge
Advocate General’s department. To spare the regiment the disruption of losing either officer, Kearny judiciously removed both men from the scene. He ordered Mason to explore the “Batie Prairie” to find more suitable location for E, F, and K Companies to bivouac, and sent Cooke on a brief recruiting mission to Louisville, Kentucky. By separating the two, Kearny allowed tempers to cool and the matter to fade away quietly.35

Once Cooke returned to Fort Leavenworth from his Kentucky exile, he experienced personal and professional joys that seemed so elusive in proceeding years. Cooke’s happiness, in part, stemmed from his belief that had duty at Fort Leavenworth would spare him and his small family from the illnesses that had devastated his health each year while posted on the southern plains. In addition, a second daughter, Maria Pendleton, arrived during the summer—joining John Rogers, now five, and the Cookes’ first daughter, Flora, who had been born at Jefferson Barracks in 1836. Two years later, a fourth and final child, Julia, would be born.

Cooke also began to explore his literary ambitions after his transfer to Fort Leavenworth. In fall 1841, he began submitting articles derived from his journal entries to the Southern Literary Messenger. The articles provided readers with selected accounts of his experiences with the army: his journey west to Jefferson Barracks in 1827, his experience along the Santa Fe Trail in 1829, and his participation in the Black Hawk War in 1832. His submissions also allowed him to describe the beauty and bounty of the West in a style that read as if he were attempting to attract settlers to the region. The pieces seemed to have been well received by the publishers and subscribers, and a decade later, the essays formed the basis of his first memoir, Scenes and Adventures in Army Life: or the Romance of Military Life, published in 1856.

Cooke also became a favorite of the regiment’s commanding officer. While recognizing the spirited captain possessed flaws that were more a reflection of his youth than his rank—
Cooke was only 31 in 1840—Kearny considered him to be “a gentlemanly [and] clever fellow” nonetheless. Kearny also recognized Cooke had become a student of the cavalry arts since joining the regiment. As a pastime, Cooke had—for years—translated foreign cavalry manuals and used the knowledge to develop drill and training exercises. Kearny, therefore, installed Cooke as the regiment’s drillmaster shortly after his return to Fort Leavenworth in 1840. During the next couple of years, Cooke would oversee the training of recruits and take steps to develop a uniform system of drill for the regiment.\textsuperscript{36}

It was, in many respects, the start of a mentoring relationship that would yield great benefits for the regiment. As western settlement brought whites and Indians into closer proximity, the dragoon’s mission to patrol the frontier became increasingly important to the security of the region, and placed greater importance on their martial abilities than ever before. During the next two years, the dragoons continued to follow the pattern of short patrols along the frontier and into Indian Territory established by Kearny. Each year, from the first thaw of spring to the onset of winter, dragoons ventured from their outposts in individual companies, or grouped into small squadrons to crisscross the plains. They oversaw the distribution of annuities, defused squabbles between tribesmen and settlers, and attempted to keep the peace between the tribesmen removed from the east and the nomadic Indians of the western plains. They also ejected white squatters from Indian lands and destroyed illegal stocks of whiskey brought into Indian Territory by unscrupulous traders when found, and advanced the army’s presence on the plains through the construction of additional outposts.\textsuperscript{37} Yet, with the exception of a short march to and from Fort Gibson in the spring of 1841, Cooke and K Company remained at Fort Leavenworth throughout these years.
In 1842, however, Cooke participated in two expeditions that illustrate the missions conducted by the dragoons during these years. In April, word that a civil war was brewing on the Cherokee reservations prompted Kearny to march out of Fort Leavenworth at the head of five companies of dragoons—including Cooke and K Company. A murder had taken place on the reservation that threatened to reignite a long-simmering feud between rival tribal factions. The man who was killed, Jim Foreman, had played a prominent role in the assassination of the controversial Cherokee-leader Major Ridge. His killer, Stan Watie, was a Ridge supporter. Joined by Governor Butler, the tribe’s agent, Kearny led his 250 dragoons into Cherokee country. When the horse soldiers arrived, their colonel summoned the two factions to a council. According to Kearny, the agent’s “timely interference, good judgment and wholesome advice” convinced the Indians to step back from their civil war and let the courts render justice in the murder case. Of course, weeks later, in a letter to the adjutant general, the colonel boasted that the presence of his dragoons played a significant role in changing the Indians’ minds: “I am now informed by Persons well acquainted with the subject, that the Indians have never been more disposed than at this time to preserve the Peace existing between themselves and between them and the Whites.”

Once assured the rival Cherokee factions would refrain from violence, Kearny led his dragoons back to Fort Gibson, where on June 6, he learned of another threat to the peace of the region. An express rider raced into the post that evening and informed the colonel that three hundred Seminoles recently removed from Florida had fled their reservation south of the Arkansas River and crossed into the Cherokee reservation. The next morning Kearny assembled his troops, and by eight o’clock, marched out of Fort Gibson in the midst of a thunder storm. For the next two days, Cooke and the other dragoons followed their commanding officer along the
banks of the Arkansas, crossing the Menard Mountains and penetrating deep into the broken country of Indian Territory. It was a miserable march. Torrential rains, fierce winds, and thunder storms repeatedly drenched the column, forcing the dragoons to encamp in soaked uniforms under the marginal protection offered by one of the many stands of oak groves lining the banks of the Arkansas.  

On the third day out from Fort Gibson, the dragoons were surprised by the sudden appearance in their camp by the Seminole chief, a man named Nacklemaha. Standing before Kearny wearing the sash of an officer killed in Florida, the chief declared his people were not happy with the location of their reservation. Since the arrival of his people in Indian Territory, the chief had learned they were to be settled along the Canadian River—a different location than where his people had been told they would settle. Gripping the handle of the dirk stowed deep in the sash he wore around his waist, Nacklemaha announced defiantly: “In Florida we were promised to be sent to Fort Gibson.” He would not return to the Canadian. He planned to rally with two other Seminole bands and hold a council to determine his next course of action. Finally, the chief announced his displeasure with the lack of courtesy shown him by Kearny: “In Florida we were treated with more friendship and consideration. I am accustomed to sit, when I have business to transact.”

The chief’s protests had little impact on the dragoon colonel. Kearny coldly informed Nacklemaha that any promise he received in Florida regarding the location of his reservation had not been authorized, and therefore, carried no authority. He and his people would not be allowed to settle at Fort Gibson. Then, in a demonstration of his unwavering conviction, Kearny declared: “This day you shall recross the Arkansas, and set out for your lands on the Canadian.”
Seeing no compromise in the disposition of his advisory, Nacklemaha pledged to lead his people back to the Canadian and left the dragoon encampment.\footnote{41}

Near midday, however, Kearny learned the Seminole chief had broken his word. After breaking camp, the Seminoles had not returned to the southern shores of the Arkansas, but had instead fled to the west. Immediately Kearny ordered his bugler to sound the call of “to horse.” They were going after the Indians and would force them to return to the Canadian. Although he hoped to avoid bloodshed, he admonished his soldiers to be ready for battle and to make the Seminoles pay dearly if they offered a fight. “If we come to blows,” the colonel calmly announced, “put your sabres well in; but on no account strike woman or child.”\footnote{42}

Cooke and K Company were given the honor of leading the dragoon column out of camp. After ascending a steep defile that brought them near the former location of the Seminole camp, the progress of the dragoons was suddenly stopped when a young boy mounted on a fleet pony dashed by the column. Kearny seized the boy’s reins and stopped the horse, but the young man was unwilling to be taken captive. As two dragoons attempted to take the boy into custody, he fought viciously and escaped their grasp. Rather than allow his soldiers to kill the child, however, Kearny ordered his men to let the boy escape. He saw no point in killing a child who only wanted to return to his family.\footnote{43}

Continuing along the Arkansas, the dragoons shortly discovered the remnants of a Seminole camp with about a dozen inhabitants still present. The dragoons quickly rounded up the Indians, and through interpreters, learned that the rest of Nacklemaha’s followers were scattered north of the Arkansas and were heading toward the Illinois River. Rather than continue his pursuit with the full complement of dragoons, Kearny divided his column. Electing to remain at the site of the abandoned camp, the colonel directed Cooke to take three companies
across the flooded Arkansas River and round-up the rest of renegades. The order also contained an endorsement of the growing confidence Kearny had in his subordinate. Once Cooke crossed the Illinois, he had “discretionary powers beyond” to end the flight of the Seminoles.44

Reflecting on the moment years later, Cooke noted that in his enthusiasm over being selected to command the squadron, he gave little thought to anything save the successful completion of the mission: “If I had stopped to reason on it, I should soon have pronounced the order impracticable; for the full banks of the river were vertical.” To complicate matters there was only one canoe available for him to cross his three companies across the river. Yet, the exuberant officer “had faith” in his abilities and those of his soldiers, and within a half hour, nearly three quarters of his command and half his horse were on the northern bank of the Arkansas.45

Cooke advanced his command, and within a mile of his crossing, encountered a Cherokee Indian who seemed to confirm the location of Nacklemaha’s camp. They were hiding in a thick stand of trees a mile or two above Cooke’s position on the western banks of the Illinois River. Cooke ordered the Cherokee to guide an “energetic officer” and a division of the squadron to the location of the camp. The captain then sent back to Kearny’s detachment for a flatboat to ferry his troops across the Illinois River. Meeting another Cherokee, Cooke was told that the woods were full of Indians and he immediately ordered his troops to deploy. Time, however, was working against the dragoon officer. The sun was beginning to set, and as the soldiers pushed through the brush, they only found discarded materials dropped by the fleeing Indians. The setting sun brought the day’s pursuit to an end, and with little recourse, Cooke reassembled his command and returned to the river’s edge. The dragoons passed the night without the comfort of supper, and only their wet uniforms to protect them from the elements.46

69
The next morning, after crossing the balance of his horses and breakfasting across the Arkansas, Cooke resumed his search for the Seminoles “ripe for adventure.” Advancing across the prairie, Cooke made his way to a lofty hilltop that afforded him a panoramic view of his surroundings. In short order, his advance guard managed to capture fifteen Seminoles who informed interpreters that Nacklemaha had concealed his people in a wood at the foot of a bluff near the hill upon which Cooke stood. Elated by the report, Cooke was immediately flushed with romantic visions of glory: “I was transformed to a General, with my four admirably instructed powerful platoons for regiments, and my trumpet signals for field and staff!”

Once again, Cooke divided his squadron. He sent a platoon to search the wood, and possibly drive the Indians forward. Then, with the balance of the command, he moved around the opposite end of the hill to cut off any route the Seminoles might take if they attempted to flee. Yet, as Cooke’s dragoons penetrated the wood, it became evident that their prey had once more eluded them. But the trail left by the fleeing Indians was readily visible and easily followed. Again dividing his squadron into two divisions, Cooke followed, sending one division along an overlooking ridgeline while his division followed the Seminoles’ trail toward another thicket of trees.

In the late afternoon, as the dragoons approached the woods, Cooke spotted the Seminole. Acting quickly, he positioned his division to cut off escape routes, and using his bugler, he directed the movements of his division on the high ground. When the latter division was in place, Cooke ordered the charge.

The dragoons raced through the Seminole camp and scattered the inhabitants into a nearby swamp. Cooke sent skirmishers to gather prisoners, but once again, the sun was working against the dragoons. Without provisions, Cooke could do little else to capture Nacklemaha’s
followers. He continued to follow the Seminoles, rounding the swamp and crossing an adjacent prairie, until the sun disappeared behind the western horizon. Although he had not ended the flight of the Seminoles, Cooke believed his efforts had been successful. For two days, his dragoons had denied the renegades rest and caused them to abandon much of their equipment and supplies. He had also captured several Seminoles. Furthermore, following the example of his commanding officer, Cooke boasted that he achieved his successes at the cost of inflicting only one saber wound on the fleeing Indians.49

Satisfied with Cooke’s efforts, Kearny terminated his pursuit and returned to Fort Gibson. Before departing the field, however, the dragoon colonel sent word to Nacklemaha warning that if the Seminoles did not voluntarily return to their designated reserve along the Canadian, the dragoons would cross the Arkansas and drive them relentlessly to the new reservation. The threat worked. The Seminoles retreated and never again attempted flight.

As the year came to an end, Cooke was emerging as a talented, capable, and trusted officer. He had been with the dragoons for nearly a decade, learning his trade through the study of foreign cavalry manuals and by implementing those lessons on the parade fields of western outposts. In addition, while his participation in the expeditions conducted by the regiment was limited, his skill as regimental drillmaster was gaining him the ever-increasing confidence of his commanding officer. In the coming months, the spirited captain would be given opportunities to prove the confidence placed in him by Kearny as the demands of the ever-expanding frontier redefined the dragoons’ mission in the far west.

1 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 192-96. Also see Young, 65-67.
Only nine of the ten dragoon companies participated in the expedition. In May, Dodge ordered Captain Clifton Wharton and Company A to proceed to the Santa Fe Trail and escort the spring caravan to the Mexican border near Chouteau’s Island. For coverage of Wharton’s escort, see Fred S. Perrine, ed., “Military Escorts on the Santa Fe Trail,” New Mexico Historical Review (July, 1927), 269-85 and 296-304.

22 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 225-26; Pelzer, Marches of the Dragoons in the Mississippi Valley, 36-37; and Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 367.

23 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 225-26. Also see Clark, Kearny, 61-62.

24 Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 368 and Pelzer, Marches of the Dragoons, 37-45.
Young, Cooke, 82-83 and Purcha, Sword of the Republic, 368.


28 Young, Cooke, 88-89. In addition to being admitted to the Virginia Bar, Cooke was also licensed to argue before the Supreme Court in 1850. Copies of his legal certifications can be found in Mss1 C774a 78-79 Cooke Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond (hereafter, CFP). Young, Cooke, 92-95.

29 Young relates that during the two years that Cooke was on recruiting duty nearly three hundred enlisted men and six officers had died at Fort Gibson. See Young, Cooke, 86.

30 “Instructions to and Correspondence with Major General Gaines and Other for Preserving Neutrality of the United States on the Frontiers During the War Between Texas and Mexico,” House Executive Documents, No. 682, 24th Congress, 1st Session, 416-27. Also see, Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 307-309.

31 Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 309-11 and Young, Cooke, 89-90. Also see Major General Alexander Macomb to Secretary of War B.F. Butler, November 1836, “Annual Report of the Secretary of War, Showing the Condition of that Department in 1836,” House Executive Documents, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 819.

32 Clark, Kearny, 70-76 and Young, Cooke, 91-93.

33 Cooke to General Matthew Arbuckle, November 17, 1837, Cooke Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Mss1 C774a 1. Also see Young, Cooke, 92-97.

34 Pelzer, Marches of Dragoons, 80-81 and Young, Cooke, 99.

35 Clark, Kearny, 78 and Young, Cooke, 99-100.

36 Kearny to Dr. W. Maffitt, March 9, 1843, Chouteau Family Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. Also see Dwight L. Clarke, Stephen Watts Kearny: Soldier of the West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 85-86. Young, Cooke, 102 and 108.

37 Clark, Kearny, 78-79, Pelzer, Marches of Dragoons, 85-94, and Young, Cooke, 101-02.

38 Kearny to Adjutant General R. Jones, June 1 and 15, 1842. As quoted in Young, Cooke, 103-04.

39 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 379-80; Clark, Kearny, 79-80; and Young, Cooke, 104.

40 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 380.

41 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 380.

42 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 380; Clark, Kearny, 80; and Young, Cooke, 104.

43 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 380-81 and Clark, Kearny, 80.

44 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 381.

45 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 381.

46 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 381-82, and Clark, Kearny, 80-81.

47 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 383-84.

48 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 384 and Young, Cooke, 105.

49 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, 384-85; Clark, Kearny 80-81; and Young, Cooke, 105.
Chapter Three

“Escort Duty on the Santa Fe Trial in 1843”

As the prairies of western Missouri began to thaw in early 1843 persistent rumors drifted into Missouri warning merchants of the Santa Fe trade to be especially cautious during their journey to the New Mexican capital. The rumors had grown out of an incident that had taken place in April, when a band of Texas privateers captured a small New Mexican caravan heading east along the Santa Fe Trail, and then robbed and killed its owner, a merchant named Don Antonio José Chávez.¹ Accordingly, the party that killed Chávez was simply one of many sent by the fledgling Republic of Texas to exact vengeance against Mexico for its continued refusal to recognize Texas independence. There were, the rumors insisted, perhaps as many as three separate groups of Texans operating along the trail that spring as part of a loosely organized offensive designed to fill Texas coffers with Mexican plunder and secure New Mexico as a Texas province.²

Happening as it did on American soil the murder of Chávez placed the United States in an embarrassing position. Since the first shots of the Texas Revolution, Mexico had become increasingly committed to a belief that the United States had brought about the conflict as a means to annex the wayward province. Although the United States was openly desirous of acquiring certain territories from Mexico, the revolution in Texas had been an organic enterprise. Yet, since 1836, Mexican suspicions had been repeatedly, and understandably, strengthened by the actions of its northern neighbor. Not only had the United States been the first nation to extend diplomatic recognition to Texas, its institutions and citizens had repeatedly aided Texas with loans of money, men, and material to ensure its survival. Still, in spite of its openly friendly
disposition toward Texas, the United States could not condone military operations by a foreign nation on its soil, nor could it withhold protection from an enterprise that was so lucrative to its own economy. As a consequence, in March, when the Mexican minister to Washington, General Juan Almonte, and a number of Missouri merchants requested the War Department provide an escort for the spring caravan, the United States had little choice but to agree.

Escorting merchant caravans along the Santa Fe Trail to the border at the Arkansas Crossing was not a new exercise for the U.S. Army. The army had made troops available for this duty whenever credible threats of Indian violence were received. The orders issued during the spring of 1843, however, added a unique dimension to military operations along the Santa Fe Trail. The primary objective of this escort would not be to protect the caravan from Indians, but from forces sent by a foreign power. Unlike the Indians residing in the territories through which the trail passed, the Texas privateers, if found on American soil, constituted an invading army. Their presence could not be tolerated for any reason. Regardless of how greatly Americans sympathized with Texas in its struggle against Mexico, the United States could not condone such an overt violation of international law by allowing that conflict to spread onto its western frontier.

When the orders for the escort arrived, Kearny assigned the mission to Captain Cooke. Yet, the escort commanded by Cooke would differ from those sent in the past. Previous escorts had been carried out by single companies in 1834 and 1835. To ensure the success of Cooke’s mission, due to the threat of possible attack by an organized military force from Texas, Kearny assigned three additional companies (A, C, and F) and a battery of two brass howitzers to the escort—a total of 190 officers and men from Forts Leavenworth and Scott. He also organized a second expeditionary force from Fort Gibson, composed of D, E, and H Companies under the
command of Captain Nathan Boone, to patrol the vicinity the Arkansas River, and if necessary, to support Cooke’s force.

Cooke led his command from Fort Leavenworth on May 27, 1843, bound for Council Grove. This forested location along the Arkansas River had, over the years, become the traditional rendezvous site for merchants making the passage to Santa Fe. Following the military road, Cooke led his dragoons on a course that was slightly west of south to pick up “the trace,” as the Santa Fe Trail was called. It was an inauspicious start. The day was miserable with cold and rain, and progress was painfully slow. Repeated downpours turned the military road exiting the post into a mud-choked quagmire, which quickly claimed several of the eleven wagons constituting Cooke’s baggage and supply trains. Hours were lost and men exhausted as the command stopped to dig wagons out of the sticky mud. After making less than twenty miles on the first day, Cooke was forced to encamp at 9 Mile Creek. It was a harbinger of things to come. At the end of the second day, Cooke disgustedly recorded: “Marched 15 miles and crossed one Company and the baggage train over the Kanzas river. . . . It rained the whole day.”

Poor weather and road conditions, bogged down wagons, and scant grass to feed his stock highlighted Cooke’s observations over the next few days as the command trekked across the prairies of modern east Kansas.

Although displeased by the poor conditions of the territory through which his command marched, Cooke’s spirits were not entirely dampened. Ever the romantic, Cooke loved being in the field. He viewed campaigns, especially those that exposed him to the frontier, as a grand source of adventure. Opportunities to hunt and fish along the trail would be numerous, and Cooke knew he could easily fit these pastimes into his official duties. Adding to the charm of this particular mission, Cooke brought along his eight year old son, John Rogers, and clearly
looked forward to indulging in these activities with the boy. Already the lad’s stamina in the saddle and lack of complaints about the hardships of the trail were greatly impressing his father.\textsuperscript{5}

Then there was the land. Cooke’s orders required that he maintain a journal during the escort, in which he was to record features of the land that would be beneficial to the military. Throughout the march, he enthusiastically noted the quality of the soil, the variety and abundance of grasses, the presence of trees, and the widths and depths of streams. In spite of its drab appearance so far that spring, Cooke was awed by what he saw and his romantic eye easily recognized the potential value of the land to the nation and its citizens once the line of settlement spread into the area. On June 2, he prophetically recorded: “... Agricultural settlements (of white or red men) can and will extend as far as the waters of the Grand river and far beyond. The migratory wave will extinguish the prairie fires; the tree will accompany the plough.”\textsuperscript{6} It was a sentiment he would repeat during the march.

On June 3, after marching 144 miles from Fort Leavenworth, Cooke led his men into the “luxuriant [and] heavily timbered bottom of the Neosho or Grand River” that was the site of Council Grove. As expected, the traders and their wagons were present but scattered amid the elms, walnuts, and sycamore trees that characterized the 160 acre oasis. It was a “charming grove,” thought Cooke, “amid the barren and shadeless plains.” Curiously, given the circumstances that had brought the soldiers there, none of the merchants seemed anxious to discuss the upcoming journey to the border, and for two days, they kept their distance. Cooke used the undeclared segregation to see to a few last minute logistical matters and to evaluate the condition of his troopers during afternoon drills. The only contact had between Cooke and the merchants while at Council Grove came late on second day, when he dispatched an orderly to inform the traders that he planned to resume his march on the following morning. He would
move ahead of their caravans and wait for them at Cow Creek—115 miles hence. The traders responded that they, too, would be ready to move out the next day.

When Cooke arose on June 6, he discovered some of the merchants were already taking to the trail. By seven o’clock, his command had struck camp and eaten, and was also ready to move out. The day’s march would be short: only fifteen miles. As the dragoons neared the first of the 56 wagons in the train near Diamond Springs at midday, however, Cooke’s learned that the caravan’s leading merchants were anxious to have him attend a council session they were holding. Evidently, his announcement that he would not march alongside their wagons during the escort left several of the Mexican traders feeling exposed and vulnerable. The American merchants expressed similar concerns, but Cooke thought their requests stemmed from an attempt to ingratiate themselves with those in whose country they were about to become guests. Still, he would not accommodate their requests. To accomplish his mission, he believed he needed to be in a position that would allow his command the greatest flexibility of movement to meet any contingency that might arise. Also, by leaving the caravan, he would not be encumbered by their slow moving wagons, which would allow him to gather intelligence more rapidly, and in effect, enable him to hunt down the Texans before they encountered the traders. Although dissatisfied, the merchants reluctantly accepted Cooke’s decision to continue ahead of their caravan. In his journal, Cooke noted that, following the meeting, “Armijo the Mexican, who has charge of a third[,] perhaps[,] of the whole caravan . . . was seemingly convinced that it would not be dangerous for him, for the escort to go on.”

The march to Cow Creek began before seven o’clock on June 7. It was a frigid morning, but unlike so many of the previous days, the skies withheld the rain. There was, however, a noticeable increase in the strength of the winds, and it appeared that a front would be moving
through the area that evening. Yet, what mattered most was that the road was in good condition and Cooke entertained few worries that his supply wagons would slow the progress of his march. Leaving the Neosho Valley, Cooke’s journal entries described the changing features of the land that reflected the geographical transition from prairies to plains. The land opened and became flat. Trees became increasingly scarce until they were only found lining the banks of waterways. Hours could pass, Cooke observed, without seeing a single tree or shrub. The land appeared to be so expansive and empty that “20,000 cavalry in a line . . . might change front with mathematical precision at any gait.”

The sparse features of the land surrounding the trail allowed Cooke to contemplate other matters over the next few days. At the camp on Turkey Creek, he noted the impressive innovations developed by his troopers to produce trench furnaces by using the smallest amounts of dried grass and wood to boil coffee when too little “buffalo ordure,” or chips, were found. He also considered new designs for equipment to improve efficiency and performance in the field, and to reduce military expenditures. East of the Little Arkansas River, Cooke observed that a leather case should be developed to protect the lock and receivers on carbines from rain. He also thought that the addition of a canvas “bell” to the backs of tents would increase the lifespan of saddles and other equipment because “rains and sunshine are injurious to leather.”

On the morning of June 10, as the dragoons continued toward Cow Creek, Cooke discovered a note from Captain Boone at the ford of the Little Arkansas. Dated June 9, Boone explained only that he was leading his command across the Arkansas River into buffalo country, and suggested Cooke “keep on to the crossing.” He made no mention as to whether or not he had discovered any evidence indicating the presence of Texans in the area. Cooke estimated that Boone’s command was, perhaps, a day’s march ahead on the southern banks of the Arkansas.
As the sun began to set, Cooke established his camp nine miles shy of Cow Creek. Other developments occurring throughout the day convinced him that it would be wise to make certain alteration to his march. He was concerned about his supply of food. Told that he would find buffalo considerably east of his present location along the trail, he had reduced the amount of rations carried by his supply train prior to their arrival at Council Grove. Unfortunately, buffalo had yet to be encountered and his meat supply was running low. Equally disturbing to him was news that two troopers were beginning to display symptoms of scurvy—which prompted him to contemplate the value of adding dried fruit to campaign commissaries.

His greatest concern, however, was the presence of 200 Kansas warriors encountered during the afternoon. They had been out on the plains hunting buffalo for several days and were in the process of returning to their home village when encountered. Although their willingness to trade dried buffalo meat for salted pork partially eased Cooke’s supply problems, their proximity to the traders disturbed him. The Indians acted rather surly when first discovered by a patrol from his column, and he worried they would be “impudent to the traders” if not kept in line somehow. To ensure the safety of the merchants, and no doubt to quicken their pace, Cooke decided to send Captain S.W. Moore and C Company to find the caravan on the back trail the following day. Meanwhile, he would lead the remaining three companies to Cow Creek and wait for the caravan.

Over the course of the next three days, while his men and animals rested along Cow Creek, Cooke grew increasingly anxious over the whereabouts of the traders. When he dispatched Captain Moore, Cooke thought the merchants would be near the Little Arkansas—or, at most, two days behind. Since, he learned that the caravan had, for several days, halted their march at eleven o’clock in the morning. Cooke realized that he could not, with any degree of
certainty, know the location of the caravan on his back trail. As his journal entry of June 11 bears out, Cooke was incensed: “These unforeseen and unusual circumstances have thrown me out a little, in my calculations: *this*, is not ‘dashing over the wide prairies.’” By his calculations he had less than fifteen days rations left and he estimated that the Arkansas Crossing was at least 120 miles west of his position—5 or 6 days marching time. Under these circumstances, Cooke thought he had little choice but to continue his march without the traders. He would march to Walnut Creek—a day away—where he hoped buffalo could be found. Although greatly displeased, he thought the situation was still well in hand. Moore and his company were with the traders. Boone and his three dragoon companies were only a few miles away on the south side of the Arkansas guarding the left flank. The extra distance between his command and the caravans would not expose the traders to any greater danger.

Cooke led his command onto the Santa Fe Trail shortly after 6:30 a.m. on June 13. It was raining and he worried the weather might spoil the day. Leaving Cow Creek, the command passed an expansive prairie dog village before entering the sand hills that marked the entryway into the Arkansas bottom. Late in the morning, Cooke adjusted his line of march to bring his troopers closer to the river, where he would call a halt for the midday meal. As the command approached the waterway, Cooke’s concerns over his meat supply faded as a pair of antelope crossed within ten paces of the column. A short distance later, two buffalo appeared. Greatly relieved at the appearance of game, he dispatched a hunting party, an officer and twelve men, to move ahead of the main column. As Cooke and the balance of his dragoons followed an hour later, the number of buffalo grazing near the trail increased. More hunting parties were released, and shortly thereafter, the reports of carbines echoed throughout the valley. In spite of his years on the frontier, during which he had engaged in numerous buffalo hunts, Cooke thrilled at the
sight of the stampeding animals as they ran “hither and thither between hunting parties in the
hills.” By mid afternoon, as the dragoons reached Walnut Creek, six of the twelve buffalo felled
were dragged into camp and the soldiers were soon absorbed in the task of drying the
“seasonable supply” of meat.

The decision to march beyond Cow Creek was also yielding other benefits beyond
securing fresh meat for his command. From his location near the mouth of Walnut Creek, Cooke
could see the camp of Captain Boone across the Arkansas. The two columns had been in regular
contact since one of Cooke’s troopers had discovered Boone’s note near the Little Arkansas ford
four days earlier. He and Boone would meet in the morning to discuss their plans for the
remainder of the escort. Given the different nature of Boone’s mission, his presence on the
southern banks of the Arkansas offered Cooke added assurance for the security of the traders.

Boone arrived in Cooke’s camp on June 14 with considerable information to share
regarding the rumored plots to seize the Mexican caravans. Boone brought with him trader
Charles Bent whose party was driving a herd of cattle and fourteen wagons eastward to Missouri.
Having recently left his trading post on the upper Arkansas, in modern Colorado, Bent had news
of events in New Mexico. As he had explained to Boone days earlier, Bent informed Cooke that
Governor Manuel Armijo left Santa Fe for the border on May 3 with a force of 600 men, but as
of ten days ago, there was no Mexican escort waiting at the Arkansas Crossing. Boone added
that prior to his leaving Fort Gibson he had learned that a man referred to as “Colonel” Ryburn
was suspected by the commander of Fort Wichita to be recruiting a force to attack the Mexican
caravans somewhere along the trail. Ryburn’s group was the second thought to be lying in wait
for the caravan. Boone also declared that a man named K. Lewis, “an intelligent white
naturalized among the Creeks,” also had warned that “300 Texans” had assembled on the Brazos
River “to come and waylay the caravan.” Cooke immediately suspected that “these land pirates” had attacked and defeated Governor Armijo’s forces at the border. Although he made no comment in his journal, the news must have made him consider the possibility that he would have to extend his escort to Bent’s Fort. It was an unappealing prospect that Kearny had warned him of before leaving Fort Leavenworth. To lead his command to that distant outpost would likely mean wintering there as well, and Cooke did not relish the idea. His command was unprepared for such an undertaking and to procure the necessary materials for such an extended stay would be a logistical nightmare.

Before taking his leave and returning across the Arkansas, Boone stated that he would shortly break camp and resume his march. He did not plan to ascend the river much farther. Instead, he thought he would turn his command southward and drive deeper into the buffalo country to search for Texans. Cooke agreed. The two officers saw little need to combine their commands. Both doubted the likelihood that the caravan would encounter a force of any kind that would require a military presence larger than that presently under Cooke’s command.

Boone, however, would not be able to depart the following morning as planned. That evening, a fierce storm descended on the Arkansas valley. For hours, wind, rain, and hail ravaged the military camps on each side of the river, and flattened nearly every tent at both locations. Cooke recorded that lightning flashes were so intense, they “illuminated the night with the light of day.” Although the temperatures had risen to more seasonable highs—evidenced by journal entries noting that men were swimming—torrential rains returned each of the next three days. Cooke began to watch the water levels of Walnut Creek and the Arkansas River with some alarm. They were rising rapidly, and within a short span of time, the streams could be crossed only with great difficulty. Captain Moore and the traders had yet to arrive, and
Cooke grew increasingly concerned that if all the streams in the area flooded, a reunion with the merchants could be indeterminately delayed.

By June 16, his fears were realized. The Arkansas left its banks that morning and filled the valley’s floodplain. Walnut Creek also threatened to flood, and by the afternoon, the probability that it would leave its banks compelled Cooke to move his camp a half mile up stream to higher ground. Within two days, it swelled over its banks to a width of fifty yards. When the traders failed to arrive on June 17, Cooke could only conclude that they were trapped by floodwaters somewhere along his back trail east of Cow Creek.

With few alternatives available, Cooke passed the next six days at Walnut Creek waiting for the flooding waterways to crest. After a visit to Bent’s camp, Cooke learned of the tremendous magnitude of the flood. Bent had sent out his men to search for alternate passages so that they might continue their journey to Missouri. Their scout of the countryside revealed that the valley was flooded as far away as Pawnee Fork—approximately 40 miles west of Walnut Creek. Although Bent was unaware, his reconnaissance had triggered a great alarm the previous night. In the morning, Boone reported that two unidentified white men had passed his camp, but had refused to stop when challenged. Immediately, suspicions mounted that the unknown men were Texan spies. Cooke called on Bent that evening to discuss the matter, and no doubt shared a few laughs when the truth was discovered. That evening, Bent related that his men had seen Captain Moore and the merchant caravan at Cow Creek. As Cooke suspected, they had been stopped by high water.

Two days later, when the waters finally crested on June 21, Cooke estimated that the flood had cost him 96 hours. Bitterly, he recorded that his command could have marched to the Arkansas Crossing and been back at Walnut Creek in the time lost. The receding waters,
however, did not relieve Cooke’s aggravations. He still could not move out until he had reestablished contact with the traders. In spite of the falling water levels, he realized the soft soil would retard the speed with which the heavily laden wagons of the caravan could move. More days would be lost waiting for them to arrive.

Prior to June 22, Cooke recorded few thoughts regarding his assignment. Although the possibility of a confrontation with Indians or Texans dictated his every decision since leaving Fort Leavenworth, there had been no substantive evidence gathered that spring to indicate whether or not the Santa Fe merchants were in any real danger. Thus far, the Texas privateers existed only in rumor and speculation. In fact, since departing Council Grove, Cooke seemed to be more absorbed by his concerns over his supply of rations and the speed of the traders than with Texans suspected of waiting in ambush along the trail. But the discovery of Bent’s partner, Ceran St. Vrain, and a small party of traders that day quickly refocused Cooke’s attention. St. Vrain had earlier separated from Bent to retrieve a substantial cache of fur pelts that had been lost when the traders attempted to float them down the Arkansas earlier that spring. Having recovered the furs, St. Vrain was moving overland to rejoin Bent when they were seen by Cooke’s pickets.

Unaware of who the travelers were, Cooke dispatched a patrol to bring the strangers into camp. After establishing their identities, St. Vrain surprised his dragoon host by revealing “with much show of apprehension and secrecy,” that he had seen and spoken with members of an expeditionary force up from Texas. There were approximately 180 Texans “well mounted and armed” in the party. Their commander was Colonel Jacob Snively. When St. Vrain discovered their camp, in fact, the Texans were on the north side of the Arkansas River. St. Vrain added that he had invited Snively and another into his camp, and that the leader of the Texans declared
that “he intended to remain in the country; and would most assuredly capture the Mexicans and their wagons, wherever they went, whenever they separated from the escort.” Afterward, Snively revealed that he intended “to conceal the booty” and “attack the Tores settlement.” St. Vrain also confirmed his partner’s suspicions regarding Governor Armijo. Following a brief skirmish between his advanced scouts and Snively’s Texans, the governor had retreated. St. Vrain offered no opinion as to where the governor might have gone, but most thought it would not be out of character for him to have returned all the way to Santa Fe. Lastly, the trader stated that Colonel Charles A. Warfield was also present with Snively’s soldiers.

St. Vrain’s report finally confirmed many of the rumors that had been floating through official and unofficial channels since the murder of Chávez in April. Although the name of Jacob Snively had yet to appear in official correspondence, the activities of Charles A. Warfield had been known to American officials since May. His efforts to recruit volunteers in Missouri had come to the attention of the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, who subsequently wrote officials in Washington to complain about the activity. He was, evidently, causing great excitement by promising his recruits equal shares of half the treasure seized from Mexican settlements, and hinted of greater rewards to follow, namely, land grants in Texas. Warfield had traveled throughout Texas and Colorado, as well as Missouri, seeking volunteers to help realize his ambitious goal of conquering New Mexico and Chihuahua. It had, in fact, been one of Warfield’s recruits from Colorado named John McDaniel who had murdered Chávez.

Unfortunately for Warfield, when the time came for his force to rendezvous at the “Place of Rocks,” in modern southeastern Colorado, less than two dozen men were present. Undeterred by the small turnout, and convinced others would join once he was in the field, Warfield led his small band of would be conquerors into New Mexico. Although no additional
volunteers arrived, Warfield remained committed to conquest, and in early May, his small force captured the tiny hamlet of Mora after a brief skirmish with an equal number of Mexican soldiers. The next day, however, a nearby Mexican force stampeded Warfield’s horses, and left his band stranded. With few options available, Warfield led his mercenaries to Bent’s Fort to obtain fresh supplies and return to Texas.

Although Snively’s name had not been reported that spring, his activities were certainly well known. It was the organization of Snively’s expedition that prompted Mexican officials to request an escort for the spring caravans. And while he supplied no name when he spoke to Captain Boone, Mr. K. Lewis had unwittingly reported the departure of Snively’s force from the Brazos in April.

Snively’s expedition effectively began in February 1843 when he received his commission as a colonel in the Texas army. His orders directed him to raise a partisan army of sufficient size to capture the Mexican caravans that spring. His commission also entitled him to half of all plunder seized as compensation for him and his men. The other half would be turned over to the Republic of Texas as reimbursement for its expenses. Between February and April, Snively actively recruited volunteers for his enterprise. Recruits were to furnish their own horses, arms, and ammunition, while a pack mule, 100 pounds of dried beef, and a supply of flour would be provided for every two volunteers. The recruits were to rendezvous at Fort Johnson, near the tiny settlement of Georgetown, north of modern Dallas, in time to depart for the Arkansas on April 25.

From Fort Johnson, Snively’s battalion of 177 “Invincibles”—as they dubbed themselves—marched west skirting the Red River for eleven days to ensure the battalion had gone fifty miles past the 100th meridian, which constituted the western border of the United
States. Striking a north by northwest course on May 5, the Invincibles crossed the Red River, and over the next several weeks, marched through Indian Territory until reaching the Arkansas River on May 27—the same day Cooke departed from Fort Leavenworth.\textsuperscript{12}

Snively immediately released his spy company to scour the valley and gather intelligence about activities along the Santa Fe road. Given the season, if the desired caravan was not quickly discovered, the spies were likely to find other travelers on the trail that could provide valuable information to their enterprise. On May 30, the spies reported fresh wagon tracks on the right bank of the Arkansas, which prompted their commander to hastily organize a night march to investigate. Meanwhile, the spies continued to follow the tracks and soon learned that they were made by wagons belonging to Charles Bent. Snively and his battalion of Invincibles arrived the following morning, June 1. Bent and his companions proved to be gracious hosts and informed Snively of recent traffic on the trail, Warfield’s activities, Chávez’s murder, and the probable location of Governor Armijo’s militia. Bent also advised Snively to move his soldiers south of the Arkansas near the mouth of Crooked Creek. It was, according to the trader, a defensible position from which they could screen their presence from the Santa Fe Trail.\textsuperscript{13}

Shortly thereafter, Snively’s spies also informed him that the caravan they were expecting was approximately ten days east of their position, under the escort of “three hundred United States Dragoons.”\textsuperscript{14} Confident his Invincibles were well within Texas territory, Snively used the Crooked Creek location as a base for his battalion over the next few weeks.

During the third week of June, as Cooke and Boone waited for floodwaters to recede near Walnut Creek, Warfield and four remaining followers happened to find their way to the Invincibles’ encampment. Still eager to serve Texas, Warfield and his men joined Snively. For men desirous to experience adventure, the timing of their arrival could not have been better.
Within days, on June 20, Snively’s spies intercepted two secret messengers sent from the Mexican caravan, then delayed at Cow Creek, to Governor Armijo. Suspecting the New Mexican militia might be near, Snively sent Warfield and a small patrol to seek out their location. Shortly after their departure, a rider returned with word from Warfield that Mexican soldiers had been found near the Cimarron Cut Off. Snively instantly ordered his battalion to mount and form battle lines. The Texans quickly covered the short distance from their camp to Warfield’s location overlooking Cold Springs, where a detachment of 100 New Mexican militia were encamped completely unaware of the Texans. Snively ordered his men to charge and the Texans fell on Armijo’s unsuspecting party. The Invincibles, that day, lived up to their name and completely routed the militiamen in less than ten minutes: killing eighteen, wounding eighteen more, and capturing eighty-two prisoners. There were no Texan casualties. Flushed with their victory, the Texans began collecting their spoils of horses, guns, and tack equipment, and returned to Crooked Creek. The caravan could not be that far away and the Texans were eager to add to their plunder.

It had only been two days since the Texans had celebrated their victory when Cooke learned of their presence in the Arkansas Valley. His thoughts immediately turned to devising a plan to best deal with this developing situation. Although Cooke did not record his thoughts on the subject, the presence of the Texans in proximity to the Arkansas Crossing brought to light two critical questions: first, where exactly was the border, and second, which country rested on the other side, Mexico or Texas? To lead his command beyond the crossing or to simply attack the Texans would invite an international incident. Yet, he could not allow the caravans to cross the border unprotected knowing that an attack was imminent.
Informed that the merchant caravan would reach Walnut Creek on June 23, Cooke dispatched messengers to invite the leading traders and Captain Boone to his camp to discuss the situation. Cooke’s messenger, unfortunately, never found Boone.\(^\text{15}\) Unaware that the Texans were less than fifty miles away, Boone had struck his camp on the southern bank of the Arkansas and moved off by the time the messenger crossed the river shortly after five o’clock that morning. Cooke knew neither the direction of Boone’s march, nor his intended destination. Regardless of whatever contingencies arose, Cooke would be left alone to face their challenges.

At the appointed hour, six of the principal traders arrived in Cooke’s camp, including the captain of the caravan, a man referred to only as Dr. East, and traders Armijo and Ortiz. Through their own devices, the traders were already aware that the Texans had forced the governor to retreat from the border. Still, they were determined not to return to Missouri. Knowing that Snively’s Texans were south of the Arkansas River and in proximity to the Cimarron Cut Off, the traders decided their only option was to take the northern branch of the Santa Fe Trail to Bent’s Fort. They would send an express rider to Santa Fe, via Bent’s Fort, to induce Governor Armijo to raise a stronger force and meet them at the Colorado outpost. Their plan, of course, was contingent upon Cooke’s willingness to extend his escort to Bent’s Fort.

Although Cooke did not like the idea of going on to Bent’s Fort, given the situation, he considered it the best option available to ensure the safety of the merchants and their wagons. Once Bent and St. Vrain agreed to provide beef for the dragoons during their extended march, Cooke believed the matter was settled. On the morning of June 24, however, the traders returned and informed him that they had decided to forego the journey to Colorado, and instead, wished to wait for Governor Armijo at the crossing. They believed it would be a month before the governor returned and they wanted assurances from Cooke that he would be willing to wait there
as well. He would not. Believing the governor would not return to the crossing, under any circumstances, Cooke refused to stay. He would not needlessly expose his dragoons to the “extreme privations and discomforts” such a prolonged stay would produce. Neither party seemed willing to compromise and the discussion shortly terminated with no decision reached except to continue to the crossing, “result as it might.”

Still fuming over the indecision of the traders, Cooke returned to his encampment at three o’clock and ordered his soldiers to strike their tents and prepare to march. Not knowing the disposition of the Texans, Cooke needed to prepare his command for a possible confrontation. As the command marched toward its next campsite, Cooke conducted a regimental drill. He deployed his dragoons in battle formations “from the column of route,—when right or left, is in front.” He repeated the evolutions for two and a half hours, before ordering the command to establish camp along the bank of the next stream.

Cooke had barely had time to allow his anger to subside when he was again infuriated by the ridiculous actions of a group of traders on June 25. This time, however, the trader in question was Charles Bent. Having had three days to contemplate the information supplied by St. Vrain, Cooke evidently became curious as to how forthcoming Bent had been two weeks earlier. Cooke rode the eight miles over his back trail to reach the trader’s camp, and soon discovered that Bent, or at least some of his employees, had been in contact with the Texans at the beginning of the month. In fact, three Texans had accompanied Bent’s party until they were within sight of Cooke’s camp. Whether or not Cooke thought he might be able to surprise the Texans somehow and avoid a clash is unclear. What was evident was that the Texans also knew of his presence in the valley and the size of his forces. In light of this new information, it was impossible to know if the Texans were still at the location described by St. Vrain. Had they
moved off to avoid the dragoons in order to attack the caravan farther down the trail, beyond the reach of the dragoons? Cooke could not be sure. He did not know the strategical skills possessed by Snively.

Yet, he knew Snively. Nine years earlier, Cooke had spent the fall of 1836 in Nacogdoches, Texas, as a member of the expedition led by General Edmund P. Gaines. He had met Snively then and had not been impressed. Snively was, as he recalled, a “shopkeeper’s clerk,” who was “quite insignificant in appearance and demeanor.” Cooke also remembered that Snively had served in Texas’ army, but was hardly impressed with that recollection.

Before departing Bent’s camp, Cooke learned that an express rider had already left for Santa Fe with a letter from the traders. He was a slight man, barely standing 5’6” tall, and was very unassuming in character. Cooke had likely not met the man, or if he had, their encounter went recorded. In his journal, Cooke referenced the messenger only in terms of his name and occupation with Bent: “a hunter,” named Carson. Surprisingly, Cooke appears to have had no knowledge of who Christopher “Kit” Carson was—in spite of the fact that by 1843, Carson was already a well known figure within the Rocky Mountain community. Kit had agreed to undertake the mission after the traders offered him $300 to carry their request for the governor to return to the border. Carson estimated that it would take ten days to deliver the message to Armijo in Santa Fe, because he did not propose to take the most direct route. To avoid the Texans, Carson and another frontiersman named Dick Owens, would follow the northern bank of the Arkansas to Bent’s Fort, where they would secure fresh horses before continuing on to Santa Fe. Cooke disapproved of the plan because he could not imagine that the governor had retreated all the way to the New Mexican capital. The idea was preposterous considering Armijo owned most of the wagons in the caravan.
Over the course of the next few days, Cooke inched his dragoons closer to the border. The traders followed, but as had become their habit, they remained separated from the dragoons by a few miles regardless of the distance marched. During this period, Cooke’s journal entries reflect the nervous energy of a soldier on the eve of battle. He turned his thoughts to relatively trivial matters, as if making a conscious effort not to contemplate what might lie ahead. His entry for June 27, for example, described in intricate detail how to improve picket lines to prevent horses from straying.

On the following day, he recorded with equal attention the excitement that was had after his artillerists targeted a cluster of buffaloes 300 yards beyond their line of march. He noted that the exploding ordinance sent most of the animals fleeing in terrific confusion, leaving only a few of the “huge terrible looking animals” motionless on the plain. But, as Cooke revealed in his journal, the real excitement came once the guns fell silent.

Following the spectacle of explosions, Cooke and a detail rode out to inspect the carnage when a wounded bull suddenly rose from the ground and charged. Cooke drew his carbine to end the rampage before it truly got underway, but his horse was too wild for him to take a shot from his saddle and he was forced to dismount. The buffalo, by then, was within 25 paces and running straight for Cooke when he fired. The ball from Cooke’s weapon struck the charging bull but the shot had little effect. Cooke had to dive out of the way to avoid being gored. The wounded bull then dashed past Cooke and headed for the column. Soon several dragoons were firing their weapons, trying to drop the bull before it reached the main body of troops. Their efforts seemed futile, as the beast dashed in and out of the dragoons’ lines. It attacked a mounted corporal and “tossed his horse like a plaything” into the air. While the unfortunate corporal was returning to earth, his clothes became snagged on one of the buffalo’s horns and he was carried
for several leaps before being thrown free. Amazingly, the buffalo continued to defy death and the dragoons, and made several more charges through repeated volleys of gunfire. Finally the bullet riddled beast fell to the ground. As the dust settled, Cooke stepped forward and delivered a merciful last shot. The animal was not wasted; it provided Cooke and his soldiers several meals.

Hunting buffalo continued to absorb Cooke’s attention on the following day. This time, however, he thought it better to send a sergeant noted for his skill on horseback and his aim to add to their commissary. Later that afternoon, Cooke watched another chase that he thought to be particularly interesting. One of the traders, Mr. Ortiz, had ridden up from the caravan to engage in the hunt in a most unique manner. He rode bare-back and only carried a lance. Cooke, who followed on horseback, watched as Ortiz dashed into a group of cows and cut his target from the herd. The chase lasted a full mile before the cow became exhausted. Curiously to Cooke, Ortiz dismounted his horse and approached the cow on foot before launching his weapon. Then, as the cow fell, Ortiz dashed forward, grabbed the spear, and drove it deeper into the animal to ensure its death.

Although the buffalo chases that day served as pleasant distractions, Cooke was frustrated by his surroundings. Throughout the escort, he employed the journal he had kept in 1829 while crossing the Santa Fe Trail for the first time. Until the previous couple of days, its descriptive contents relating the best locations to camp, find game, and grass had served him well. But the road had changed since 1829 and he no longer found his journal reliable. During the previous day’s march, he could not locate a particular creek described in his old journal and now his command was running low on water. And while he was not sure of his exact location, he entertained no doubts that his command remained well within U.S. territory. Yet, after
marching twenty miles that day, he expected to be closer to the Arkansas Crossing. From the location of his camp that evening, he expected to see the sand hills that lined the banks of the great river, but they were nowhere to be found. He had followed the trace for most of the day in a direction that was “a little south of west,” but nothing seemed familiar and none of the landmarks matched his 1829 journal.

Cooke began the last day of June by conducting a monthly muster and inspection of his troops at six o’clock in the morning. By eight, the command was ready to mount, and the march toward the border resumed. Scanning the eastern horizon, Cooke saw no indication of the traders. He had not seen them since his command struck the trail the previous morning. Owing to a steep descent in the road that would require much labor to keep the wagons upright, Cooke was convinced that they had halted their march in the early afternoon. He was unfazed by their absence; he had become rather accustomed to it.

The dragoons had marched only four or five miles when, shortly after ten o’clock, Cooke sighted three horsemen “about 1200 paces ahead.” He instantly concluded they were Texan spies, and ordered a squad to give chase and bring the riders to him. Within twenty minutes, the sergeant returned to report that the spies had escaped across the Arkansas and joined a large force of men on the opposite bank. Cooke ordered a platoon forward, and directed the sergeant guide them to the location of the Texans. The balance of the command was to advance at the usual gait.

From a bluff overlooking the river, Cooke saw a “considerable force of men and horses about a fine large grove on the opposite bank” about a mile distant. He also noticed that a white flag had been raised. Calling Second Lieutenant John Love and a trumpeter forward, Cooke issued orders for them to cross the river under the U.S. flag and inquire as to who the men were,
what the reason for their presence was, and who their commanding officer was. The lieutenant was to offer safe passage across the river to their commanding officer, who Cooke demanded to see. Finally, Cooke also instructed Love to take notice of the river to ensure that the battalion could cross, if the situation warranted. As Love raced toward the river, Cooke called a war council with his remaining officers. The issues at hand were whether or not the Texans were on U.S. soil, and if so, what course of action should the dragoons take. Cooke declared his belief that it was their duty to disarm the Texans, by force if necessary, and he wanted their opinions. The officers, save two who pleaded ignorance, agreed that the Texans were on American soil. They were, however, unsure as to their authority to legally disarm the Texans.

Before Cooke and his officers completed their discussion, Lieutenant Love returned with Colonel Snively and an aide. Cooke turned to Snively and curtly declared: “Sir, it is the belief of myself and [my] officers that you are in the United States; what is your business here? What force have you?” As Snively was about to respond, Cooke interrupted with a final question: “have you a commission?”

Snively immediately produced the document and handed it to Cooke. As the dragoon captain read over the commission, Snively explained the presence of his 107 men, and declared that they were in Texas. Cooke did not answer, but returned to his officers to show them Snively’s commission and resume their previous discussion. Cooke still had but one question, “Shall I, or not, disarm these men, doing it by bloodshed, if they make it necessary?” As the council of officers considered their responses, Cooke declared that he would not feel “bound” by their decision. The officers remained divided. Captain Burdett A. Terrett and Lieutenant Love favored disarming the Texans. Lieutenants George Mason and William Bowman, and Captain Benjamin D. Moore opposed.
Having received their answers, Cooke stepped away from the assembly and took a brief moment to consider what to do next. He knew the border had never been marked, but remained steadfast in his opinion that the boundary line was farther upstream. The Texans were on American soil. Even if they were at a point on the map that declared Texas to begin on the southern bank of the river, Cooke believed the Texans intended to violate international rules of war by crossing to the northern shores of the river to enter American territory and attack the caravan. As he scanned his surroundings, his opinion was strengthened: a mile or so in the distance he could see members of Snively’s command crossing the river to reach its southern bank.

Returning to where he had left his officers and their guests seated on the grass, Cooke announced his decision:

Gentlemen, You are in the United States: I believe the line has never been surveyed and marked, but all the world agrees that it strikes this river, about, or above the “Caches” . . . Some believe it as high as Chouteau’s Island, 60 or 70 miles above that point. Now, all the best writers on national law agree that no Power in its warfare against another has a right to enter a neutral’s territory, there to lie in wait for his enemy; or, there to refresh himself, afterwards to sally out and attack his force, or his citizens, or his property; & it is the rightful power and duty of a neutral in such case to disarm the intruders, and send them wherever they please; through, or out of, their territory. . . . Now there are twenty of your men now crossing the river to the South side; and I found three of your men on our road, which I believe to be spies against the caravan: a caravan of peaceful traders between the United States and a friendly power; a trade which is our wish to protect; and which you profess your determination to attack. Now, Mr. Snively, I demand of you that your men march across this river and lay down their arms before me . . . I will return enough to you, to subsist yourselves wherever you may go, and you have permission to enter the settlements of the United States. I have 185 soldier besides officers and two howitzers which [to] throw shells into the grove you are encamped in . . . If they leave the grove in the opposite direction, I shall instantly discharge my howitzers among them, and thus drive you from the woods, and attack you in the plains!”

Snively and his aide vigorously protested Cooke’s declaration. Snively attempted to legitimate his claims of being in Texas by recounting the course of his march and reiterating the
fact that the boundary line was “not defined and he [Cooke] could not point it out.” When he realized his appeals were having no effect, Snively tried to appeal to Cooke’s sense of humanity. The Texans needed to retain their arms because two or three thousand Indians had been seen lately in the area, and Snively feared an attack. Also, his men were on the brink of starvation, and they needed their weapons to secure a supply of buffalo, which is what his men had been attempting to do when Cooke saw them earlier. Next, Snively claimed that he and his force were under the impression that the caravans had returned to Missouri; he and his battalion were in the process of returning to their homes. Cooke would not be swayed. He told Snively that he had one hour to return across the river and convince his men to surrender their weapons.

Snively took his leave convinced that Cooke meant either to disarm them or “cut them to pieces” if but a single man attempted to escape. Before he entered the river, however, he was recalled by Cooke. It occurred to Cooke that the Texans would likely not ford the river immediately to his front, but would cross a mile below his position at the point where Lieutenant Love returned with Snively. There, the current was not as swift and the channel was not as deep. This distance between the Texans’ encampment and the probable fording location offered too many opportunities for men on horseback to take flight, especially in light of the fact that Cooke also would have to cover that same distance, and then, ford the river in order to give chase. Cooke announced that he would accompany Snively across the river. To his surprise, Snively and his aide “cheerfully assented.” As the three men plunged into the stream, Cooke signaled the howitzers and three companies to follow, which did not please Snively. Later the Texas colonel recorded, “I was under the impression that he alone would cross with me.”

On the opposite bank, Cooke carefully approached the encampment, being sure to stay out of rifle range from the hills to his right and the grove of trees to his left. When opposite
Snively’s camp, Cooke turned and deployed his command in order of battle. The howitzers were positioned in the center of the line and a slow burning match was conspicuously lit.²¹ Cooke sat atop his horse and waited for Snively’s men to begin exiting the trees. Snively’s aide had been sent to convince the volunteers to surrender their arm, but no one, including the aide, had returned thirty minutes later. Finally, Cooke demanded Snively enter the trees and personally compel his men to march into the opening and stack their arms fifty paces in front the dragoons’ line. Reluctantly, Snively complied and announced that if he was not killed, he would return and “have nothing more to do with them.”

Moments later, the first man appeared. Cooke directed Captain Terrett to order his company to draw sabers and advance to receive the weapons. Soon what looked like the entirety of Snively’s command was approaching from their places of hiding. Suddenly, the aide began to berate his fellow Texans for their rush to surrender their arms. Cooke quickly had the foolish lieutenant silenced, most likely by threatening to hang the man. After the Invincibles delivered their weapons, Cooke ordered another squad of his dragoons to enter the trees that had concealed the Texans to search for additional arms. Not surprisingly, several more weapons were found and brought out to be put in the wagon with the others. As the hidden weapons were being secured, Warfield stepped forward to personally address Cooke. Claiming that he “stood alone,” Warfield expressed his desire to surrender separately from the others by placing his rifle directly into Cooke’s hands. Cooke scoffed at the idea, stating that he had found Warfield among the Texans, and therefore, he would treat Warfield the same as the other Texans. The colonel would have to stack his rifle with the others. Cooke would not accept it.²²

Finally, with all their arms secured, Cooke directed ten of Snively’s men to retrieve their weapons. As a gesture of chivalry between gentlemen, Cooke also returned a brace of pistols to
Snively. Yet before the dragoons could depart, several of Snively’s men rushed forward and demanded to be treated as prisoners of war. Cooke refused their request. To afford them such recognition would insinuate that a state of war existed between the United States and Texas. Cooke was already convinced that his actions would create much controversy and he did not wish to worsen the situation by taking prisoners. Instead, he informed the men that they were not prisoners. They were free to return to their homes in Texas, or if they wished, he would escort them to the United States.

Cooke returned to the northern bank of the river and encamped directly across from the Texans at half past three that afternoon. He decided to name the stand of trees where the Texans were encamped Jackson Grove. He dispatched a messenger to the caravan to inform them of the events that had transpired, and to warn them to be on their guard. Although he had disarmed the one hundred men with Snively, Cooke had learned that a party of approximately seventy men, formerly under Snively’s command, was likely to be lurking in the area.

Hours later, when the caravan arrived at Cooke’s camp, the leading traders rushed to his tent to hear firsthand what had happened earlier. Many were shocked that he had been so humane in his treatment of men they considered to be little more than murderous pirates. One declared that Cooke “ought to have slaughtered them all.” Cooke dismissed the remark. It had been a long, tiring day and the captain soon, but politely, dismissed the merchants. He needed to record the events of the day in his journal. Cooke retired that night firmly convinced that he had taken the proper course of action with regard to the Texans: “I have not failed in the moment of action to correctly perceive & accomplish the duties—the rights & interests of my government in the sphere of the trust with which they have honored me.”
Cooke rose the following morning at the usual hour and made ready for what promised to be another busy day. As his dragoons underwent their normal routine to make ready to move out, Cooke again entertained the leading merchants of the caravan. They arrived early that morning to inquire about the arrangements for the final drive to the border. They wished to cross at the usual location, but were apprehensive since learning that another group of Texans was possibly still in the area. Cooke announced that he would see their wagons safely across the Arkansas, but he had no intentions of lingering at the border as previously discussed. Per his arrangements with Snively, he planned to divide his command. He and three companies would escort the traders to the border, while Captain Terrett and a squadron of men would begin marching eastward those Texans who wished to go to the buffalo country. Terrett, in fact, was, at that moment, across the river gathering the Texans. Satisfied with Cooke’s plans, the traders returned to their wagons and slowly began leading their teams onto the trace. Meanwhile, Cooke likely returned to his journal to finish recounting the events of the previous day.

By eight o’clock, Cooke’s patience were beginning to be tested by the failure of the Texans to cross the river. He ordered a second squadron of dragoons to ford the Arkansas and bring the would-be raiders at once. The Texans may not have been prisoners, but, for the moment, he controlled their liberty, and he expected faster compliance with his directives. When the Invincibles finally arrived on the northern bank of the Arkansas, Cooke pulled Snively aside and privately explained the plans he had made earlier with the merchants. Snively again requested Cooke return a few more guns to his men. Citing the fact that one of his soldiers had been wounded and was too ill to travel, Snively wanted a mere five rifles to distribute among men he trusted because he worried that those who already had guns might abandon him and strike out to find the other party of Texans. Snively insisted that if Cooke granted the request, he
and the others would return to Texas without causing any more mischief. Cooke agreed to release the additional weapons on the conditions forwarded by Snively. He next addressed Snively’s battalion, stating that those who wished to be escorted to buffalo ranges should make ready to depart with Captain Terrett that day. Those who wished to return to Texas with Snively were free to go.

As the Texans made their decisions, Cooke requested an interview with Colonel Warfield. Since learning of his presence among Snively’s volunteers, Cooke had contemplated placing Warfield under arrest and returning him to Missouri to stand trial for the Chávez murder. But when Warfield produced his commission signed by Sam Houston, Cooke decided it would be best to release him. It was an irregular commission, failing to designate Warfield as a member of any branch of service, but it did grant him the power “to grant commissions without limit.” As distasteful as it was to Cooke, a professional soldier, he did not believe he could hold Warfield responsible for the murder and allowed him to join the others electing to remain with Snively. Cooke noted in his journal: “I dismissed Warfield fearing to meddle with the municipal law even of Texas.”

As noon approached, Cooke watched Captain Terrett and his squadron of sixty dragoons take to the back trail toward the buffalo ranges to the east. In their wake rode fifty Texans. Before turning his remaining troops onto the road west and the caravans, Cooke reminded Snively and the balance of his command that they were to leave the territory as soon as possible. Snively assured Cooke that they would.

Three days later, Cooke observed Independence Day by firing one of his howitzers to mark the occasion. His camp rested on a plain overlooking the crossing that marked the end of his escort. He would hold his command there until the fifty six wagons belonging to the traders
were safely across the border. The passage of the wagons would take a total of ten hours. Little
of note had occurred since leaving Jackson Grove. Captain Moore and Corporal Van Alstine had
been injured chasing buffalo. Both were the victims of prairie dog holes. Cooke had a good
laugh during the afternoon when three express riders from Bent’s Fort delivered him a message
warning of a force of Texans in the area.

On July 5, Cooke turned his command east and began the long trip back to Fort
Leavenworth. At Jackson Grove the next day, Cooke sent an officer and thirteen dragoons
across the Arkansas to make sure Snively’s Texans had departed. Upon his return, the officer
reported the Texans had gone, leaving a trail east of south. No grave was seen to mark the last
resting place of the wounded man in Snively’s command. Three days later Cooke overtook
Terrett and the other Texans. Terrett’s report on their conduct was disappointing. They were
little better than outlaws, and in Cooke’s absence, Terrett thought it best to take precautions
against the Texans similar to those that would be employed while guarding “inveterate enemies
in the same circumstances.” Luckily for Cooke, he would not have to suffer their presence for
very long. When they requested he write them a passport to return to Texas through Indian
Territory, Cooke readily agreed—happy to be rid of them. In addition to the meat they had
already secured, Cooke also supplied them with 420 pounds of flour and 25 pounds of coffee,
which were deemed surplus and not worth carrying back to Fort Leavenworth. Cooke also
returned three more rifles and a pistol to their new leader.

During the evening of July 8, as the dragoons endured another downpour at Walnut
Creek, Cooke finished his report on the encounter with Snively. He would send Sergeant
McLure as an express rider to Department Headquarters in the morning. Undoubtedly the
government of Texas would be outraged once it learned of the events that had transpired at
Jackson Grove and it would be best to inform his superiors and officials in Washington as soon as possible before that storm hit. Unfortunately for Cooke, his encounters with Texans were not over. East of Turkey Creek, five days later on July 13, the dragoons surprised the very Texans Cooke had released a week before. Cooke noted that their numbers had increased, with fourteen well armed men from the faction that had split from Snively prior to June 30. Initially Cooke thought to ignore them, but he had earlier encountered a small wagon train owned by an Englishman bound for Chihuahua. Since the Texans had made no demonstrations to prove their honesty or trustworthiness, Cooke resolved to disarm them yet again to ensure the safety of the Englishman. This time, however, he would leave not a single gun among their numbers. Nor would he issue them a passport to return to their homes when they later requested one.

As his soldiers relieved the Texans of their weapons, Cooke interviewed a few of their leaders. To his satisfaction, he learned that after releasing the Texans at Jackson Grove much misfortune had befallen the band still with Snively. Rather than return to Texas as promised, Snively struck out to find the splinter faction, now commanded by a man named Eli Chandler, and resume his mission to seize the Mexican wagons in the spring caravan. Before Snively’s party could find Chandler, however, they were attacked by Comanches. Although Snively’s band escaped, the Indians evidently stayed on their trail, and once the two groups were united, they had to fend off another Indian attack. Five or six Texans had been killed and approximately sixty horse and mules were stolen. Snively’s attempt to rally Chandler’s force also failed. The latter group of Texans did not believe they could overtake the caravan before it joined Armijo along the Cimarron. Disillusioned and disheartened, Snively, Chandler, and their followers were now retreating to the settlements of Texas.
Cooke resumed his march the next morning, and over the next eight days, he and his campaign-weary dragoons progressed toward Fort Leavenworth. On July 15, as the command passed through Council Grove, it discovered more merchants preparing to lead their twenty wagons loaded with merchandise up the trail to Santa Fe. Knowing that these men would not have to experience the anxieties of the traders recently left at the border must have instilled Cooke with a great sense of accomplishment and pride. As the march continued, one of the few difficulties encountered was finding a campsite with sufficient quantities of water and fuel on July 19. Both were very much in need that evening, as Cooke determined that it would be best to have the men of his command remove their campaign beards so that they would be in compliance with regulations as they entered Fort Leavenworth. South of the Kansas River the following afternoon, the dragoons stopped briefly to review Captain Terrett and his company as they passed with sabers presented to salute their comrades before turning onto the road that would lead them due south to Fort Scott. It was, Terrett believed, the easiest route to his post “under the present circumstances.” Twenty four hours later, on July 21, Cooke entered Fort Leavenworth and surrendered his three companies to the post’s commander, Lieutenant Colonel Richard B. Mason.

If Cooke entertained any doubts as to the disposition of his superiors toward his conduct during the “Snively Affair,” they were immediately extinguished. Within days of his return to Fort Leavenworth, Cooke learned he had been selected to escort the fall caravan. But unlike the escort just completed, the decision of where to terminate the escort would be left to his discretion. In August, the commander of the Department of the West, General Edmund P. Gaines, would write that Cooke had permission to assure the merchants protection along the trail “until they shall meet a competent escort; or, until they shall reach Santa Fe.”25 If Cooke
deemed it necessary to extend his escort all the way to Santa Fe, he would be permitted to decide the best place for his troops to pass the winter. He could remain in Santa Fe, travel to Bent’s Fort, or establish a camp along the Arkansas and pass the winter on the plains. It was an amazing degree of latitude to bestow upon a captain, especially one as junior as Cooke.\textsuperscript{26}

Cooke’s actions regarding Snively and the Invincibles were not only approved by his superiors, they were seen as ideal demonstrations of intelligence, strength, and restraint that reflected well upon Cooke and the service. Immediately, General Gaines publicly declared that Cooke was justified in his actions, regardless of whether or not the Texans were on American soil when they were disarmed.\textsuperscript{27} Months later, in October, Colonel Kearny would write: “Your disarming those Texians whom you found within the limits of the U.S. was an act which entitles you to the thanks of the authorities in Washington, & which meet with the approbation of myself & all officers I have communed with.”\textsuperscript{28} It was a sentiment shared by many others.

When Cooke marched out of Fort Leavenworth on August 24, his official duty was to escort the fall caravan to the border at the Arkansas Crossing, or possibly, to the New Mexican capital. The real purpose of the mission, however, was for the army to demonstrate publicly its confidence in Cooke and to endorse his course of action during the “Snively Affair.” As anticipated, once Snively’s report of the incident reached in Austin, Texas officials voiced their outrage over Cooke’s conduct by comparing his actions to those of the basest savage. The complaints fell of deaf ears. The government’s position was much the same as that of army. Although the United States would reimburse the Republic of Texas the price of the arms confiscated by Cooke and direct the army to convene a court of inquiry to investigate the affair, no additional redresses of Texan grievances would be considered. In fact, the court of inquiry
would be merely *pro forma*. General Gaines selected the officers of the court and installed Colonel Kearny as its president.

Cooke returned to Fort Leavenworth on October 25. To his great satisfaction, a large force of Mexican soldiers was at the border when the caravan arrived at the Arkansas Crossing on October 3. He elected to return east the following day rather than winter at Santa Fe or Bent’s Fort on the upper Arkansas. Although he had made contracts with Bent and St. Vrain to supply food for his men and forage for his horses, the prospect of forcing he and his men to winter on the plains with nothing but tents to protect them from the elements held few charms. To winter in Santa Fe would be disastrous for his command; it would “sicken us to the heart of its barbarous dearth of all mental and creature comforts; for five or six months would some of us think of little but home.”

Cooke’s two missions to escort caravans to the border in 1843 represented the only times in the history of the Santa Fe Trail when the army was called upon to protect merchants from threats emanating from sources other than Indian warriors. Although the army would continue to escort merchant caravans, as well as its own supply trains, across the trail throughout the nineteenth century, the escorts of 1843 marked the final time he would be assigned to that duty. Cooke’s career, however, would return him to the trace and Arkansas valley several times before he retired three decades later. The stand of trees known as Jackson Grove, where the Snively Affair occurred, would continue to be a source of pride for him. In a memoir published years later he observed that the site was named “by an officer who was called upon very suddenly to decide to which of three nations it belonged; there depended much individual, if not national interest:--some half a million of property and the amount of blood that might be risked for the
capture or retention of so much." It was in many ways one of the defining moments in his storied career.


2 Texas designs on New Mexico originated during the administration of President Mirabeau Lamar in 1840 when his attempts to secure peaceful relations with Mexico failed. Believing the conquest of Mexican territory a legitimate wartime objective, Lamar saw the acquisition of New Mexico as part of a larger, more ambitious goal: securing access to the Pacific for Texas. Texas’ second president rationalized if New Mexico could be had, so could California. His desires were dashed in 1841, when the expedition he sanctioned to secure the territory was captured by a force raised by New Mexican Governor Manuel Armijo. See William Campbell Binkley, “New Mexico and the Texas Santa Fe Expedition,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXVII, no. 2 (October, 1923), 85-107 and T.R. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans* (De Capo, 2000), 258-59. As for the objectives of the privateers commissioned in 1843 by President Sam Houston, during his second administration of the Lone Star Republic, see William Campbell Binkley, “The Last Stage of Texas Military Operations against Mexico, 1843,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, (January, 1919), 260-271; David Dary, *The Santa Fe Trail*, 173-176; and Leo E. Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 42-43.

3 Since 1829, when Captain Bennet Riley led four companies of the Sixth Infantry on the first military reconnaissance of the Santa Fe Trail, the army had provided military escorts to merchants along the trail in 1833, 1834, and 1835. These latter missions differed little from the one conducted by Riley, except that they were executed by mounted troops. In 1833, the escort was performed by company of the First Ranger Battalion, a short-lived precursor to the First Dragoons. Companies from that distinguished regiment escorted the caravans in 1834 and 1835. See Otis E. Young, “Military Protection of the Santa Fe Trail and Trade,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. XLIX (October 1954-July 1955), 19-32.


5 Cooke, “Journal I,” 80. Cooke actually makes the comment on June 7, but obviously the boy had been displaying his hardy nature for days. John Rogers endurance for the hardships of the trail were a great source of pride for the family and something they always remembered. Shortly after John’s premature death in 1890, his son, St. George Cooke requested his Aunt Flora send him stories about his father. She furnished only a brief sketch, in which Joh’s participation in the 1843 escort was one of the first things she mentioned: “when quite a child — on a long summer’s campaign with troops — & never giving up to fatigue or weariness.” See Flora Stewart to St. George Cooke, May 12, 1891. Cooke Family Papers. Mss1 C7753a 1-3. Virginia Historical Society. Richmond, VA.


7 Otis E. Young, *The West of Philip St. George Cooke*, 112.


9 William Campbell Binkley, “The Last Stage of Texas Military Operations Against Mexico, 1843,” 268-69. Binkley indicates that the communications exchanged between Mexican and American officials that spring focused on Warfield. Binkley, however, does concede that Mexican officials were very much aware of Snively’s activities. They, for whatever reason, did not mention Snively in their correspondence, although the concerns they voiced regarding possible attacks on the spring caravan seem to indicate Snively’s plans as the source of their fears.


14 Jacob Snively to M. C. Hamilton, June 28, 1843, Army Papers, 1840-1845. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

15 Boone led his command south to look for the Texans, but did not find any. Ultimately he reached the Canadian River before returning to Fort Gibson. Louis Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons in the Mississippi Valley* (Iowa City:
Iowa Historical Society, 1917), 99-102. Pelzer’s volume also includes a transcript of Boone’s trail diary as an appendix.

16 For Carson’s own account of his activities that summer, see: Milo Milton Quaife, ed., Kit Carson’s Autobiography (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 68-71, and Harvey Lewis Carter, Dear Old Kit: The Historical Christopher Carson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 84-85. Carson, curiously, does not mention the encounter with the Texans at the beginning of June in his autobiography.

17 Snively to George W. Hill, July 9, 1843. Army Papers, 1840-1845. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

18 Snively, of course, omitted these last few pleas in the report he wrote on July 9, 1843. What he did state, however, in substance, at least, collaborates the statements made in Cooke’s account. Yet, there are a couple of interesting differences in their accounts regarding the white flag report by Cooke. In his journal, Cooke stated: “they raised, as I apprehended, a white flag.” Snively makes no mentions of anyone raising a white flag. Stewart Miller, a member of the Invincibles, recorded: “They [the dragoons] then hoisted a white flag which was also done by Col. Snively on the right bank.” Miller also provides an interesting commentary at to what happened once Lt. Love entered the Texas encampment to speak to Snively. When Love stated Cooke’s demand to see Snively on the opposite bank of the river, Miller observed that the Texas colonel agreed to go, provided a few of his conditions were met first. According to Miller, Snively demanded that “they acknowledge this to be the Republic of Texas soil, and would grant him a passport back to the right bank. To both of these conditions the messengers agreed.” See, H. Bailey Carroll, “Stewart A. Miller and the Snively Expedition of 1843,” 281.

19 Snively to Hill, July 9, 1843.
20 Snively to Hill, July 9, 1843.
21 Snively to Hill, July 9, 1843.

22 There has been much discussion as to whether or not Cooke actually disarmed the Texans. Arguments have been forwarded that the Texans actually concealed their weapons, and instead, delivered the guns they had taken from their Mexican captives. See H. Bailey Carroll, “Stewart A. Miller and the Snively Expedition of 1843,” 283-84 and Otis E. Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 119-120. For an inventory of the weapons seized by Cooke see, United States, “Correspondence with the Texan Authorities in relation to the Disarming of Texas Forces under Command of Major Jacob Snively, by United States Troops,” Senate Documents, 28th Congress, 2nd session, no. 1, pp. 96-112. Snively does not mention any trickery on the part of his soldiers to conceal their weapons.

24 Not surprisingly, Snively’s recollection of this exchange differed from that recorded by Cooke. Snively reported: “when the men clamoured to be received as prisoners of War I requested Capt Cooke to receive them as such. He said that he had made his terms, and if they were not satisfied, they should receive worse, intimating, that if they were not satisfied, he would fall on them and put them to death, unarmed as they were.” See Snively to Hill, July 9, 1843.

26 Otis E. Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 127.
27 Otis E. Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 126.
29 Philip St. George Cooke, Scenes and Adventures in the Army, or, Romance of Military Life, (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1859), 257-258. Cooke published this memoir thirteen years after the Snively Affair. Interestingly, he did not include an account of the Snively Affair for its pages. He alluded to the event several time, but refrained from actually naming it.
30 Philip St. George Cooke, Scenes and Adventures in the Army, or, Romance of Military Life, 262.
Chapter Four

“The Platte River Expedition of 1844”

Although the outcome of the investigation into the “Snively Affair” still loomed on the horizon, Cooke likely gave little thought to the matter as 1843 drew to a close. Spared the hardships of wintering in New Mexico, at Bent’s Fort, or somewhere along the Santa Fe Trail, the dragoon captain settled into winter quarters at Fort Leavenworth, and undoubtedly, passed the holiday season in the company of his young family and friends. Since General Gaines appointed Colonel Kearny as the president of the court of inquiry, the outcome of its investigation was practically a foregone conclusion. Both Gaines and Kearny had repeatedly commended Cooke’s actions in public pronouncements and private correspondence since learning of the incident. In fact, as the new year dawned, Cooke’s greatest concern likely focused on the question of whether the court would render its decision in time for him to return to the field during the coming spring, if his company was once again sent on patrol.

Still, as the opening months of 1844 passed, Cooke’s patience with the court was tested. Since returning from the fall escort, he had been placed on restricted duty and the lack of activity was taking its toll. Adding to his frustrations, orders arrived at Fort Leavenworth announcing that five companies were to be sent on an expedition to the Platte River Valley in March. Although hostilities were not anticipated, the thought that K Company, his Black Horse Company, might be sent into the field without him was nearly intolerable. They were his troopers and he believed himself honor bound to be in the field with them to share in whatever hardships and dangers they confronted—however minimal. Fortunately, in the weeks leading up to the patrol’s date of departure, the skies over western Missouri opened and reduced the land
into an impassible morass of mud. Mercifully for the dragoons, the inhospitable condition
convinced military authorities to delay the expedition. Army authorities wanted the dragoons to
arrive among the Indians in a condition that would properly demonstrate the military might of
the United States.¹

In April fortune continued to smile on Cooke. The court of inquiry finally convened and
rendered its decision at the end of the month. The anxious captain learned of his fate in a
congratulatory letter written by Colonel Kearny. Attached to the letter was a copy of the court’s
ruling, which totally exonerated Cooke. In the court’s opinion Cooke not only disarmed the
Texas filibusters within the territory of the United States, but declared his actions demonstrated
“an appropriate exhibition of military force.” He had not “exceeded his authority,” and
therefore, nothing about his conduct was “harsh” or “unbecoming,” as charged by the Texas
government.²

Cleared of all the charges lodged by the Texas government, a relieved Cooke returned to
full duty and awaited his next assignment. The expedition to the Platte Valley had been
rescheduled for the summer, and as expected, his company had been attached to the detail. In
many respects, the patrol marked a return to the duties that had become a hallmark of the
dragoons’ frontier mission and a key component of the government’s overall frontier defense
strategy. Since the implementation of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, civilian and military
officials had worked earnestly to devise a strategy that would not only secure the western border
but ensure the peaceful occupation of an Indian territory immediately adjacent to the western-
most states of the union. Roughly starting at the northwestern shores of Lake Superior, the line
separating Indian country from western white settlement descended through Wisconsin toward
the southwestern corner of Iowa and then plunged southward along the western borders of
Missouri and Arkansas. Although the focus of the federal strategy shifted between protecting white settlers from Indian war parties, preventing white settlers from squatting on Indian land, and securing the removed eastern tribes from attacks by plains warriors, the key to its success were the annual dragoon patrols executed during the spring and summer months. In 1844, the focus of the strategy, according to General Winfield Scott, was “to prevent Indian hostilities by the exhibition of military force on and beyond our frontiers.” To accomplish these aims, the army planned two expeditions. In addition to the Platte River valley patrol, a company of dragoons from Fort Des Moines under the command of Captain James Allen would reconnoiter northwestern Iowa Territory and southwestern Minnesota Territory to prevent a war between the Sioux and the Pottawatomie.

These expeditions into Indian country were conceived as measures to cow frontier tribal societies with displays of military power that afforded the army simultaneous opportunities to extend the olive branch or threaten the sword, depending on the situation. Policy makers believed the appearance of a well-armed, well-mounted, and thoroughly disciplined column of dragoons would have a dramatic impact on Indians whose only contact with whites had been limited to small groups of roughhewn fur trappers, pious missionaries, or civilian government agents. Unlike infantry soldiers, the dragoons commanded greater respect from the plains tribes—in no small part due to the fact that they, unlike their “walks-a-heap” counterparts, were mounted on sturdy American horses. As the patrols ventured across the prairies into Indian country, the dragoons collected intelligence, established communications and, whenever possible, they also attempted to settle intertribal disputes and negotiate treaties.

Yet the 1844 expedition to the Platte River Valley would differ slightly from previous patrols. True, the chief purpose still would be to remind the Indians of the martial strength of the
United States. The motivation for the expedition, however, stemmed from the region’s rising importance to the nation and its citizens. Since the beginning of the decade, nearly three thousand emigrants had packed their lives into canvas-topped wagons and left their homes in the east to seek new beginnings in Oregon and California. Regardless of their “jumping off” point, once these wagon-bound travelers joined the Oregon Trail, they embarked on a trans-continental trek through country that was largely controlled by the United States in name only. The perceived vulnerability of the emigrants, therefore, cast a new light on the need to extend federal authority onto the plains, as well as showcasing the importance of the annual patrols made by the dragoons. It was imperative that the tribes living in proximity to the road be made to understand the importance of not disturbing the emigrants as they passed. Since 1843, and throughout the 1844 travel season, government offices and leading newspapers across the nation received numerous reports describing the harassment of emigrants along the trail. Although no deaths at the hands of Indians had been recorded, demands for tribute, the theft of livestock, acts of pilfering, and ceaseless begging all combined to raise the ire of emigrants. Moreover, reports indicating an escalation of intertribal warfare in the region heightened to disturbing levels the possibility of an armed encounter between emigrants and roving war parties.⁶

When Colonel Kearny issued the new orders for the expedition from the Third Military Department in St. Louis, he related the concerns of federal authorities for the emigrants’ safety to the expedition’s commanding officer: Major Clifton Wharton. As a career officer and veteran of numerous plains expeditions, Wharton embodied the resolve and single-mindedness with which the United States viewed emigrant safety. The goal of the expedition, now scheduled for August, was to impress upon the Indians “the importance of their friendly treatment of all white persons in their country, to convince them of the power of the U.S. Government to punish them for
aggressions on such persons, [and] to urge upon them the policy of peace among themselves &
their neighbors.”⁷ Since many of the emigrant complaints implicated the Pawnee, Kearny
deemed vital the visitations to their villages in north-central Nebraska.⁸

In particular, the escalating conflict between the Pawnee and the Lakota greatly alarmed
federal officials. Although the two tribes had warred against each other for decades, the conflict
seemed rather inconsequential before large numbers of white emigrants began crossing the
territory contested by the two tribes. Whereas officials were under no illusions that the Pawnee
might steal a few carelessly guarded horses from the passing emigrants, they doubted the Pawnee
would orchestrate a large-scale attack on the travelers. On the other hand, these same officials
were aware that, since 1838, the Lakota had viciously and repeatedly raided the Pawnee. The
Lakota had destroyed entire crops and several large caches of food and clothing, reducing the
once-prosperous Pawnees to the brink of starvation and poverty. Officials worried about what
might happen if continued raids and additional losses drove the Pawnee to the extremes of
desperation.⁹ Therefore, as a final protective measure, Kearny ordered Wharton to encourage
“reconciliation between the Pawees and the Sioux.”¹⁰

After months of delays, when the bugler’s call of “boots and saddles” rang out at 10:00
a.m. on August 12, 1844, five companies of dragoons excitedly sprang from their barracks and
filed into their respective company stables. Ten minutes later, following the charge of “to
horse,” the soldiers exited the stables, led their animals to the border of Fort Leavenworth’s
parade field, and formed ranks. Unlike the beginning of so many days that year, the skies over
Fort Leavenworth cleared and greeted the dragoons with almost perfect weather. A light breeze
drifted across the field with just enough strength to give life to the banners decorating the post.
For a few moments the dragoons remained in formation and awaited the arrival of their officers.
As if cued by the regimental band, Cooke and the other expedition officers said their farewells, mounted their horses, and dashed over the parade field. Joining their individual companies, the officers immediately began to bark orders for their troopers to mount their horses, dress their lines, and make ready for inspection. Sitting atop their horses, clad in their dark-blue field tunics and light blue trousers with a yellow stripe down each leg, the men of the individual companies were a truly impressive sight.¹¹ The seventeen gilt buttons adorning their tunics glistened beneath white leather harnesses that crossed over their chests and connected to white leather belts around their waists that were fastened with an oval brass buckled struck with the initials “U.S.” Each soldier carried a Model 1840 Dragoon saber attached to their belts and a Caliber .52 Hall-North Carbine that was carefully slid into a bucket attached to their saddles near the soldier’s right knee. A Harper’s Ferry pistol rested in a holster that was also attached to saddle.¹²

The dragoons were an interesting reflection of the changing face of the expanding nation. By the early 1840s, the army no longer reserved the ranks of the First Dragoons for native-born, whites of high moral character. A combination of traditional prejudices against the army and the reality that enlisted dragoons received no special treatment or privileges, led to a decline in enlistments by those initially sought to fill the ranks of the dragoons. As a result, the dragoons—like the army’s other service branches—were populated by an increasing number of German and Irish immigrants, not to mention the men of low character initially barred from enlisting.¹³

Once the officers inspected their companies, Major Wharton gave the order to form columns of twos and move out. At the signal, Cooke gave his horse a gentle prompting with his spurs and pulled the bridle slightly to face the animal toward the west. As the ranking line officer, Cooke led the expedition out of Fort Leavenworth toward the Council Bluff road. The
other four companies followed in descending order of their commanding officer’s rank. Like Cooke’s K Company, all those that followed rode horses of uniform color. The dragoons of Captain John H. K. Burgwin’s F Company fell in behind Cooke, mounted on their grays. Captain Benjamin Moore’s C Company rode bays, and they were followed by the chestnut-colored horses of Lieutenant Philip Kearny’s G Company. The last to fall into line, also mounted on black horses, were the dragoons of A Company from Fort Scott, commanded by Captain Burdett Turrett. As the companies exited the parade field, a battery of two twelve-pound brass howitzers fell in behind the column. Colonel Kearny believed the artillery a prudent addition to the expedition. Like many veterans of frontier service, he knew artillery frightened weapons to Indians. They detested the guns because they objected “to being shot at by a wagon.”

For Cooke, the launching of expedition marked a joyous occasion. Despite his years of service in the West, extended patrols across the frontier were still sources of romantic adventure to him. Cooke enjoyed the rugged natural beauty of the plains, the camaraderie of his fellow officers, and numerous opportunities to indulge in the outdoor activities that gave him such pleasure. Adding to his delight, three of the four companies detailed to the patrol were intimately familiar to him, having served under his command the previous year along the Santa Fe Trail. Once again, he would delight in the company of these officers at mess each day, as they shared stories, told jokes, and discussed the important matters of their day. The officers mess would also host the regimental chaplain, Reverend Leander Ker, and noted artist Charles Deas. And while the command would not travel far enough west to experience the thrill of chasing buffalo, Cooke knew their course provided numerous opportunities to hunt and fish before returning to Fort Leavenworth. Ever the romantic, even at thirty-five years of age, Cooke
remained enchanted with his profession and the opportunities for adventure that it afforded. Still, the most significant aspect of Cooke’s participation in the expedition went unrecorded. Although he would not command the expedition, his participation would afford him the opportunity to continue learning his profession by participating in another campaign and witnessing the manner in which it was to be carried out.15

As Wharton’s force proceeded along the Council Bluff road, it quickly fell into the typical routine of a first day’s march. The companies advanced in columns of twos, but after their exit from Fort Leavenworth, they divided into three squadrons—a practice that, at least in theory, cut down on trail dust. Two companies formed the flanking squadrons, while the remaining company acted as guard for the rolling stock. The squadrons marched in parallel columns, separated by approximately fifty yards, with the howitzers taking positions behind the center column. Progress that first day was purposefully slowed as Cooke and his fellow company commanders called frequent halts to adjust gear and inspect equipment. It was a time consuming process, but the roadside inspections allowed for early detection of defective equipment or animals within a reasonable distance of the post to send back for replacements. Still, in spite of the slow progress, the command intercepted its supply train of fifteen wagons within a few miles of the post. Due to its slow pace, the supply train left the fort an hour before the main body of the expedition. Three teams of mules pulled each wagon, but the tremendous quantity of rations, supplies, and equipment insured that its reunion with the dragoons would be brief. It quickly fell behind to a distance of a half mile, and generally maintained that interval each day of the patrol.16

Although the weather remained pleasant throughout the day, evidence of the unusually wet season lingered in low-lying areas, and during the early afternoon, a patch of wet road forced
Wharton to alter his course to prevent his wagons from becoming mired in mud. Lacking a map of the region, Wharton allowed his guide, a Delaware Indian named Jim Rogers, to turn the column from the Council Bluff road. Rather than simply leading the dragoons around the water-soaked area, Rogers guided the dragoons several miles to the south before suddenly stopping. Scanning his surroundings, the guide realized he was utterly lost. He had mistaken landmarks along a branch of the Kansas River for similar ones along the Missouri, and as a result, led the patrol in the wrong direction.

Since Wharton planned to make a short march that day, he quietly accepted the situation and ordered the command to encamp along the banks of the Stranger River once his guide located sufficient grass and fuel. Unfortunately for the dragoons, it was not be the only time their guide misled the column during the expedition. At seventy-two years of age, Rogers remained a stout man who knew the “general geography of the country,” and “all the Southern routes from the Missouri to the Nebraska.” It was evident, however, to Cooke and other officers that the guide was unfamiliar with the territory Wharton wished to cross in order to reach the Pawnee villages along the Platte.17

Reveille sounded the next morning as soon as the first traces of light appeared over the eastern horizon. Within moments the dragoons stood in formation before their tents. Fully dressed and armed, they were ready for roll call and inspection. Next, the dragoons gathered their horses and took them to fresh grass following “stable call.” Half an hour later, the bugler’s call to breakfast signaled the time for the men to leave their animals and return to camp for their morning meal. Following breakfast, the guard changed. The next charge blown was the “adjutant’s call,” which signaled yet another inspection—this time of a small detail from each company before one of its officers. The balance of the company, then, broke down the tents and
packed its gear into its respective company’s wagons. Finally, the soldiers led their horses into camp, where a lieutenant inspected the animals to make sure they were being properly cared for by their enlisted riders before being saddled. Soon thereafter, the guide led the expedition’s pioneer party and the quartermaster from camp to strike the trail for the column and supply wagons to follow. The dragoons repeated the process at the beginning of each day. In the evening, its order would be reversed once sufficient quantities of wood, water, and grass were found in close enough proximity to suggest an appropriate campsite to the expedition’s quartermaster.18

Although alerted to Rogers’ unfamiliarity with their surroundings, Major Wharton continued to entrust the guide with the responsibility of leading the column. The decision infuriated many of Wharton’s officers, including Cooke. The guide lost several hours leading the column back toward the Council Bluff road on a compass-be-damned, zigzagging march over rough terrain dotted with soft soil and frequented by numerous water crossings. Their patience was further tested when a wagon became trapped in mud while following the guide’s unpredictable trial. The dragoons lost an hour digging the wagon out of the mud, but once they resumed their march, Rogers’ uncertainty made for slow progress. The dragoons did not find the military road until after midmorning.

Their luck did not improve. The column no sooner returned to its proper western course, when another supply wagons broke down. Waiting for replacement parts to be brought from Fort Leavenworth cost the expedition another hour. Then, as if an omen of things to come, the terrain claimed yet another piece of rolling stock. As the dragoons descended a steep hill approaching Independence Creek, an axle broke on one of the howitzer carriages. The dragoons were only fifteen miles out of Fort Leavenworth, and undoubtedly disgusted with their lack of
progress. With no alternatives, Major Wharton again ordered the patrol to encamp along the
creek, and directed the howitzer’s crew to repair the damaged the carriage.

On the third day of the patrol, August 14, Major Wharton determined to leave the
Council Bluff road again, and strike a new trail in hopes of discovering a shorter, more direct
line to the Pawnee villages. Although he had never traveled the contemplated course, the major
believed the watersheds of the Missouri and Kansas rivers would provide a more desirable route
for the army to travel. More importantly, however, was that a shorter road would do much to
dissuade the Pawnee from committing too many depredations along the trail. Still, considering
Rogers’s shortcomings as a guide, the questionable conditions of the terrain, and the absence of a
reliable map, it was a daring—if ill-advised—decision by the expedition’s commanding officer.
Cooke observed, “A good deal of responsibility is assumed in making this experiment, as our
guide has already given evidence of deficiency of judgment, as well as a want on his part of a
practical knowledge of the country, and we have no map of the Indian territory on which we can
entirely rely.” Yet, Cooke remained optimistic and embraced his commanding officer’s
decision: “‘Nil desperandum,’ however, is our motto, and ‘Onward,’ shall be our cry.”

Misfortune, however, continued to plague the dragoons. Within a few miles of their
departure from the Council Bluff road, another wagon broke down, causing another lengthy
delay. As the enlisted men repaired the wagon, a few of the officers, including Cooke most
likely, drew their sabers and chased a wolf on the prairie. Later in the afternoon, after marching
only seven more miles, yet another wagon became disabled as the column descended a ridge that
approached the Wolf River. Knowing that the repairs would, once more, require hours to
complete, Wharton ordered the dragoons to halt and make camp. The dragoons were three days
outside of Fort Leavenworth, yet were still within thirty-five miles of the post.
As the dragoons approached their campsite, a member of Cooke’s K Company, Private Clough, was suddenly stricken by some unknown illness and fell from his horse. Although the surgeon was immediately upon the scene, the convulsing private died within moments. The death of a soldier on such expeditions was an unfortunate, but not uncommon occurrence. Yet, by tattoo that evening, Wharton faced a disconcerting possibility. The expedition’s doctor listed twelve dragoons on the sick rolls, which signaled the possibility that a dangerously infectious illness might be spreading among the dragoons. Cooke noted that a few of the ill soldiers suffered from fevers earlier that spring and concluded that their condition was a relapse triggered by the heat. Heightening concerns, over the next few days, more men began to suffer from fevers and chronic diarrhea. In total, approximately twenty-four members of the expedition, including a few officers and teamsters, became ill and were placed on the hospital rolls. Tragically, on August 27, another soldier, Private Thompson of F Company, died from his illness.20

Still undeterred, over the next two weeks, Cooke and the other members of the expedition followed Wharton on a north-by-northwest course across the rolling prairies and broken terrain of modern central Kansas and Nebraska. Owing to the still saturated condition of the ground in low-lying areas, the command was forced to cross much of the territory atop the ridges and hilltops that separate the tributaries draining the region to keep the wagons free from muddy passages. In spite of these efforts, the expedition’s supply wagons were repeatedly damaged or disabled by the rough terrain. On August 25, for example, the axle on the wagon carrying equipment and supplies for Cooke’s company snapped while fording a stream. The company and its commanding officer had to remain behind to affect its repairs, while the main body of the expedition continued its march. Given the sentiment of the day that gentlemen did not engage in
physical labor, Cooke likely passed the time fishing or writing in his personal journal while his soldiers repaired the wagon.

Since Wharton had no reliable maps, the dragoons traveled with only the vaguest idea of their actual position. Every stream encountered represented a mystery, and the dragoons could only guess at its proper name and drainage. Frequently, the course of the expedition was determined after reaching the summit of an elevation with a particularly panoramic view that offered an easily followed trail in the general direction Major Wharton desired to travel. As a consequence, Cooke and the dragoons endured numerous marches and countermarches as the expedition felt its way across the prairies. The practice was especially trying for the hapless guide Rogers. He had to explore the trails that seemed promising but often led to impassable streams or insurmountable geographic features. Just as often, his explorations led to stream banks that troops had to cut down or bridge—both of which required hours of exhausting labor to accomplish. The stress became so great on the old Delaware guide that he twice threatened to quit the expedition and return to Fort Leavenworth because he could not provide the expedition with the information it needed. He had, as Second Lieutenant James H. Carleton suggested, “seen the elephant.”21

Adding to the steady, but tortoise-like pace, the expedition also fell victim to the popularly held idea that western bound emigrants used guidebooks that were absolutely reliable. On August 18, shortly after beginning their march, the dragoons discovered the tracks of emigrant wagons that seemed to lead in a promising direction. Believing the owners of these wagons “always start with Guides perfectly acquainted with the country,” Wharton ordered his dragoon to follow their trail. He hoped to follow their course to the Platte Valley and the Oregon Trail. To Wharton’s surprise, the emigrants were themselves lost. The dragoons, fortunately,
had gone but a short distance when they learned that the trail made by the emigrants led into a “Cul de sac,” or dead end. The dragoons corrected their course before losing too much time, but the march that day ended soon thereafter when they came upon a branch of the Nemeha River that required the banks to be cut down before it could be forded.22

Finally, at 11:00 a.m. on August 27, after two exhausting weeks, the dragoons crested a high ridgeline from which they saw the Platte River in a broad valley below. The elation felt by all members of the expedition, however, was brief. Although they had managed to find the sought after waterway, no one knew in which direction the Pawnee villages lay. After consulting his officers, Major Wharton determined the dragoons were below the Indian villages, and ordered the column to turn west and ascend the river. Fortunately, Wharton guessed correctly. After reaching the southern bank of the Platte, and wheeling left along the Oregon Trail, footprints discovered on a sandbar in the stream that indicated the Indians had descended the river to reach that position.

On the twenty eighth, the dragoons crossed to the northern bank and marched west. The unusual character of the river and the surrounding valley struck Cooke and the other officers. Bayous and marshes lined the river intermittently, and in places the soil appeared sandy and sterile. Beyond the river, however, the soil suddenly became thick and black, and indicated a high degree fertility. The river, itself, was generally shallow but exceptionally wide, spanning from a half mile to over a mile in width. The luxurious growth on several tree-covered islands in the river channel also impressed the dragoons. These “gems,” thought Cooke, were so beautiful “a Calypso might be glad to reign ... [them] in.”23

That evening, after the dragoons had completed a twenty-mile march, two Indians arrived in camp as dusk began to settle on the valley. The dragoons thought the Indians were Pawnee,
but as they did not speak English and no one among the dragoons spoke their language, communications were slow to open. To overcome the barrier, the dragoons called upon Rogers to converse with the two men in the universal sign language of the Plains Indians. From Rogers’ gesticulations, the dragoons learned that two Indians came from the Grand Pawnee village a few miles upstream. Their chief sent them to extend greetings to the soldiers and to give Major Wharton gifts of green corn and bread. Rogers also informed the dragoon officers that the Indians were excited to see the soldiers, but were also in an uneasy state. For nearly two weeks, a persistent rumor warned of an attack by the Shawnee and some of their tribal allies. The beleaguered Pawnee thought the rumors to be well-founded, and buried all their possessions in secret caches ten days earlier. Upon learning a large group of horsemen had entered the valley the day before, the people became unnerved and their chief sent the two emissaries to ascertain the intentions of the invaders and return to the village with news.

After enduring a tremendous overnight thunderstorm, the dragoons marched by 7:00 a.m. toward the Grand Pawnee village. It lay nine miles further upstream on the south side of the river, but owing to their reputation as skillful thieves, Major Wharton elected to establish his camp two miles short of the village. The location of the dragoon camp made little difference. Groups of finely decorated and elaborately costumed warriors rode out to salute the dragoons, and by the time the soldiers had erected their tents, curious Pawnee visitors filled the camp. To Lieutenant Carleton, the Pawnee welcomed the arrival of the dragoons more excitedly than “boys in country towns in Maine would the approach of a carnival with real lions and living elephants.”

As the day progressed, the arrival of additional Pawnee villagers contributed to a carnival-like atmosphere in the encampment. At two o’clock, the principle chief of the Grand Pawnee, Char-a-cha-ush, or Cunning Chief, entered the dragoon encampment to pay a “visit of
ceremony” and to dine with Major Wharton. A large delegation of warriors carried all manner of trade goods for the soldiers to purchase, and soon, a brisk exchange was underway. The latecomers began to haggle with the dragoons over dried buffalo meat, buffalo robes, and moccasins, hide lariats, beaded leggings, and other goods. Unfortunately, many soldiers learned firsthand of the well-deserved reputation the Indians had as shrewd traders and light-fingered thieves. As Lieutenant Carleton noted, the Indians “generally got the best end of the bargain by stealing twice as much as they bought.” For example, one soldier thought he had purchased a buffalo robe with a pound twist of tobacco, only to discover later that he was also missing a knife, his spurs, and several other personal items. The soldier was convinced they were “keeping company with the tobacco.”

The visitations continued until the sun began to drop below the western horizon. Prompted by the fading light, Major Wharton ordered all the Indians to exit the camp before the sun disappeared or they would be required to spend the night in the dragoon camp under guard. To his chagrin Cunning Chief discovered that he was not excluded from Wharton’s directive. He expected to spend the night in the major’s tent, feasting on exotic delicacies prepared by the major’s servant, Cleggertt. The chief’s insatiable appetite had exhausted the major’s hospitality, and with little ceremony, Wharton dismissed the chief. Clearly offended, Cunning Chief stormed out of camp puffing on the pipe he had filled with the intentions of sharing with the expedition’s commanding officer.

It had been a festive day, but signs of the hardships and privations suffered by the Pawnee were readily apparent to Cooke. From the appearance of the Indians in camp, the officers and enlisted men easily noticed that the tribe had been ravaged by smallpox. Many bore horrific scars from the disease. Several, in fact, appeared to have lost an eye to the disease.
Evidence of their wars with neighboring tribes was also present. Cooke noted that along the valley’s ridgeline, at regular intervals, the Pawnee stationed sentinels in outposts to warn the village of approaching danger. Constructed of brush to conceal the lookout, the chain of outposts stretched for miles along the valley above and below the village, and clearly demonstrated that the Pawnee, at no time, felt wholly secure from an attack.27

By 9:00 a.m. the following morning, the Pawnee made their way to the dragoon encampment for the council. Although a large number of Republican Pawnee had traveled the nine miles down river to join their Grand Pawnee kin, Cooke noted that Major Wharton was disappointed that very few in the audience were from the Pawnee villages on the Loup Fork. Wharton had sent runners to the other villages, as well as to the Pawnee mission, with invitations to the council after the dragoons established their first camp in the Platte Valley. Unfortunately, only a few representatives from the other tribes had arrived that morning with Cunning Chief. A letter brought by the agency’s interpreter, Mr. Cleghorn, which was written by one of the missionaries, explained that the chiefs on the other side of the river considered the invitations extended from Cunning Chief and not “the White War Chief.” As there were hard feelings between the Pawnee on the Loup Fork and those on the southern bank, the chiefs had elected to send representatives rather than attend the council in person.

Unwittingly, as the major was to learn, he had stumbled into a contentious issue that deeply divided the Indians. According to the missionary’s letter, a clause in the treaty the Pawnee signed with the government in 1833 required them to relocate all their villages north of the Platte River. The primary object of the treaty was to secure title to tracts of land claimed by the Pawnee and to settle on them other tribes removed from the east. The federal government wanted to accomplish two objectives. First, it wished to keep the Pawnee at a safe distance from
the eastern tribes. Second, once the Pawnee were removed north of the Platte, the government planned to establish an agency among the tribe and begin leading the Indians down the road to civilization. Once a site for the agency was selected, the government sent blacksmiths, teachers, farmers, and mill workers and equipment for the benefit of the Pawnee. The Pawnee, however, were not interested in relinquishing their traditional ways, and by 1844, only a few families were living full-time at the agency and only two of the smaller Pawnee bands had moved north of the river: the Loups and the Tepage. The resentment toward the bands living south of the river stemmed from the perception that bands living north of the river bore the brunt of attacks from the Lakota. The tribes living south of the river were angered because the agency staff and the missionaries favored the northern bands. In the council, the missionary hoped to enlist the major’s assistance to convince the southern bands to relocate their villages north of the river.

By eleven o’clock a great circle had formed around Major Wharton outside his tent in the center of the dragoon encampment. Cunning Chief and the other Pawnee dignitaries sat on the ground to the right of the major and the dragoon officers completed the left side of the circle. The balance of the Pawnee villagers sat on the ground in arched rows behind the circle of dignitaries and the enlisted troopers stood as sentinels around the entire assembly. To open the proceedings, Major Wharton produced a large quantity of tobacco and presented it to the Pawnee leaders. Pipes were immediately filled and passed around the circle for all to take a ritualistic smoke, a pledge that the words they spoke would be true. Once the ceremony was complete, Wharton stood to address the gathering. He had to pause after each sentence to allow his words to be properly translated. Although such delays were typical, the speed of Wharton’s delivery suffered from additional translation. While Mr. Cleghorn spoke the Pawnee language fluently, he was of French-Canadian heritage and had not mastered the English. As a result, one of the
dragoon officers, most likely Cooke, had to translate Wharton’s sentence into French, before Cleghorn could translate them into Pawnee.28

Assuming a paternalistic tone, Wharton explained to the Pawnee leaders that he and the dragoons were but a few of the warriors in the Great Father’s army, and that they had traveled a great distance in only a few days to relay the words and sentiments of the president. The Great Father, according to Wharton, was disappointed to learn that the Pawnee were at war with several of their neighbors, including the Lakota and the Kanzas tribes. War, the major lamented, was an evil enterprise, which reduced its practitioners to the point of ruin. Rather than pursue destructive wars, the major urged the Pawnee to cultivate the soil in the manner of the white man because it would “increase their numbers, and the promotion of their comfort and happiness.”

Wharton next cautioned the Pawnee leaders to prevent their young men from stealing horses from other tribes, because such thefts were the root cause of most of their troubles. Stolen horses should be returned to their rightful owners once discovered. Wharton insisted that such actions would promote “kind feelings instead of hostile ones” between the Pawnee and their neighbors. If the Pawnee desired peace, the Great Father would offer his aid to “bury the hatchet” between the tribes.

Wharton continued his oration by demanding that the Pawnee do nothing to interfere with “the Great Father’s white children” who were “going to the big water which lies beyond the Stony mountains.” The Great Father expected the Pawnee to treat these travelers with kindness and to aid them whenever it was necessary. The Pawnee were also to abstain from drinking “Fire water, or Whiskey,” which would destroy them as assuredly as the grass on the prairies was consumed by fire. Finally, Wharton reminded the Pawnee of their treaty obligations to move north of the Platte. He pointed out that others within the tribe had done so, and they were
now enjoying the fruits of useful pursuits taught by the white men at the agency. The Great Father, Wharton cautioned, would insist upon their removal north of the river.

After professing his love for the Great Father, Major Wharton, and the dragoons, Cunning Chief declared that he was not aware that the 1833 treaty required his people to move. Moreover, as the Great Father had failed to provide his people with the cows and horses promised in the treaty, Cunning Chief planned keep his people in their present location. Solemnly the chief declared: “These lands are as much mine as my Great Father’s.” As for the emigrants, Cunning Chief admitted that his young men had stolen a few horses, but thought those acts were trivial matters because he had heard no complaints. What mattered most to the Pawnee chief was the safety of his people against future Lakota attacks. Were traders allowed to sell guns to the Lakota, when none would sell to the Pawnee? He wanted to know whether his people would be able to secure a supply of guns and ammunition to defend themselves against future attacks. He understood that guns awaited the Pawnee at Bellevue as part of their annuities, but he worried the traders would refuse to deliver the guns.

Major Wharton declared that the Pawnee living south of the river had no choice but to relocate. They had promised to do so when they signed the treaty eleven years earlier, and it was in their best interests to move as soon as possible. Firstly, by moving to the Loup Fork and uniting with their kinsmen, the southern bands would strengthen their ability to defend themselves against their enemies. Secondly, their young men would be removed from the Oregon Trail, and by extension, from the temptation to steal horses and other livestock from passing emigrants.

A warrior from the Republican band, named Tic-ta-cha-ri-co, or Mad Warrior spoke next. Like Cunning Chief, he too was distressed over the relocation issue. He did not want to move
north of the river because his people would be more vulnerable to Lakota attacks. He was also angry that his people did not get to share in the tribe’s annuity payments and were refused aid by the whites at the agency because they would not move. Mad Warrior was also angered by the perception that the Great Father was doing nothing to stop the Lakota from killing his people. Angrily, he demanded: “The Sioux burnt our lodges and killed out people. Why are they not made to pay us?”

Others among the Pawnee followed, but the major spoke no more that day. The Pawnee orators declared their desires for peace and denounced the Lakota as bloodthirsty villains perpetuating war and suffering. The council, however, ended rather abruptly once a Tepage chief, who resided north of the river, stood to speak. Within moments of his first utterance, an alarm spread “of some conflict between the Sioux & the Pawnees.” Cooke and the other dragoon officers suspected that it was a ploy to stop the speaker before he could “tell some unwished for truths.”

As the afternoon was still young, Wharton ordered the tents struck. The abrupt ending to the council confirmed that yet another session would be necessary with the bands on the Loup Fork and the major did not wish to linger at his current location. Wharton made arrangements with Cleghorn to ready the northern bands for a council the following day, after learning that their villages were less than a dozen miles away. The agency interpreter assured the major that the Loup Fork villages could be reached easily by dusk. A good road on the other side of the river would lead them directly to Pawnee mission.

By 2:30 that afternoon, the dragoons were ready to march. Wharton, however, did not merely plan to exit the Grand Pawnee village. He wanted to make a demonstration that would convey to the Pawnee the fighting skills of U.S. troops. Once the dragoons crossed the river, the
major ordered the three squadrons to be put through a series of regimental drills. As the regimental drillmaster was present in the person of Cooke, the dragoons were well-prepared for such a demonstration. Under Cooke’s direction, the squadrons maneuvered through several battle formations before terminating the exercise with a dismounted charge as foragers. Then, to indicate the dragoons’ full capacity in combat, Wharton ordered the howitzers unlimbered and discharged to edify the Indians.

Satisfied that the Pawnee were thoroughly intimidated by his soldiers, Wharton turned his command on the road to the Loup Fork villages. Unfortunately, the difficulties that had plagued their travel since leaving Fort Leavenworth continued. As the afternoon faded into twilight, the road suggested by the interpreter also disappeared. By dusk, Cooke thought the road to be little more than a poorly marked trail. Still worse, much of the terrain still to be crossed by the dragoons passed through low, water-soaked areas. As Lieutenant Carleton noted, “What was our surprise when night came, to find ourselves just getting amongst a series of lagoons and quagmires, where five or six wagons would be stalled at once, and which would take the men, in some cases, hours to extricate.” Repeatedly the wagons and animals sank so deep into the soft soil that the dragoons tied drag ropes to the animals and equipment to pull them out of their muddy snares. The dragoons unloaded several wagons in order to make them light enough to be lifted out of the mud and pull to solid soil. Then, of course, they had to reload the wagons. To the bewilderment of all, the Loup Fork was not reached until well after midnight. The easy ten-mile march suggested by Interpreter Cleghorn turned into an exhausting, eighteen-mile, mud-choked ordeal.

The fortunes of the dragoons did not improve the next day as the command attempted to ford the Loup Fork. Although the stream was only a couple hundred yards wide, Cooke noted
that its depth varied and indications of quicksand were in abundance. Major Wharton had hoped to ease the labors of his command by sending for one of the missionaries to guide the dragoons across the stream, but to the surprise of all, no one from the mission responded to his request. Fortunately, several Indians had gathered on the opposite bank, and as the dragoons began to venture into the water, they immediately plunged into the fast-flowing current to mark a course for the soldiers to follow. Still, a few horses floundered in quicksand as they approached the opposite bank and their riders were, to the amusement of onlookers, thrown into the water. Fortunately, none of the men or their horses was lost. Quicksand also claimed two of the wagons that followed. They were ultimately freed, but only after considerable time and effort were expended dragging them to the opposite bank.

Wharton ordered the dragoons encamped once all the men, stock, and equipment had crossed the Loup Fork. He hoped to learn more of the condition and disposition of the Pawnee, by holding interviews with the missionaries, and again, invited them to his tent before the council. The missionaries, however, seemed intent upon avoiding the dragoons at all costs. The Reverend John Dunbar, who was recognized as heading the mission, declined to visit the major altogether. The missionary was suspicious of the dragoon presence, and in spite of repeated professions of the army’s peaceful intentions, Dunbar remained aloof for the duration of the dragoons’ stay along the Loup Fork. The other members of the mission’s staff were only slightly friendlier. A few accepted Major Wharton’s invitation but their visit was a disappointment. They neither volunteered information nor gave direct answers to the questions asked by the assembly of officers gathered in Wharton’s tent. As Reverend Ker, the expedition’s chaplain, later commented: “They looked upon our visit to the people among which they lived, as an uncalled for intrusion.”
Although the missionaries made plain their disdain for the dragoons, their charges—the Tepage and Loup Pawnee were intrigued by the military’s presence and arrived at the dragoon encampment in great numbers to hear the words of the “white war chief.” At four o’clock, Major Wharton again distributed tobacco among the Pawnee leaders so that they could fill their pipes and pass them around the circle outside his tent. After taking the requisite number of puffs, the major stood and delivered his opening remarks in the same manner he had at the previous council. Aside from congratulating the Loup Fork bands for embracing the opportunities offered by the agency staff, his remarks were much the same as those uttered at the previous day’s gathering, with Cooke again translating the major’s words from English to French. After urging the Pawnee to turn a deaf ear to anyone who suggested they abandon the mission, he offered the government’s assistance to end the wars with neighboring tribes and warned them to stay away from the evils of whiskey.

The chiefs who responded during the gathering contributed little to what had been said at the previous council. They agreed that it would be good to have peace with the Lakota, but were more concerned with securing the arms sent them as part of their annuities. One of the final speaker, however, revealed the depth of the rift between the bands on the Loup Fork and those who remained south of the Platte River. Us-a-ru-ra-kur-ek, or Lodge Chief, declared that he, and not Cunning Chief, was actually the head chief of the Grand Pawnee. According to Lodge Chief, Cunning Chief repeatedly pledged but failed to move his people near the agency. Lodge Chief was also angered at his southern kinsmen for mocking as “priests” those Pawnee who relocated near the mission on the Loup Fork. Defiantly, the Grand Pawnee chief declared: “He who spoke to you yesterday on the other side of the river is a liar. . . He is no Chief, but I am a
chief . . . . It grieves me to find that the people on the other side [of the river] will not listen to their Great Father and come and live here.”

Major Wharton ended the council by assuring the Pawnee that their words would be delivered to the Great Father. Before the assembly dispersed, however, Lodge Chief suggested the Pawnee and the Great Father’s soldiers celebrate their friendship and asked the dragoons to permit the young men of his village to return that evening to feast and dance. Major Wharton agreed, and as a demonstration of his goodwill, he ordered a quantity of flour and pork issued to the Pawnee on their departure.

As the second council was held on the last day of the month, while the Pawnee prepared for the celebration, Major Wharton inspected the troops of the expedition and ordered each company to conduct a muster. When finished, the enlisted men gathered drift wood and built a bonfire for the evening’s performances. By sundown, the Pawnee signaled their approach with hundreds of voices singing a war song that drifted on the night air. Accompanied by flutes and drums, the song had a hypnotic effect on the soldiers, especially as its volume increased and faded as the singers passed through ravines, wooded areas, and other obstacles that muffled their singing.

As the Pawnee entered the dragoon campsite, the people formed a great circle around the bonfire built by the soldiers. The warriors who were to dance that evening assumed positions within the circle. Dressed in their finest battle regalia, which included caps made from war-eagle feathers and necklaces made from grizzly bear claws, each warrior also wore a wolf-skin mantle or buffalo robe that depicted scenes of his personal heroics in battle or on horse-stealing raids. At a signal given by Lodge Chief, the drums and flutes came to life once more and choir of a dozen or so other warriors began to sing. The warriors circled around the bonfire and then began
their individual war dances, brandishing the weapons they favored in mock demonstrations of battle. As observed by Lieutenant Carleton, the warriors sprang “this way and that, as the song went on, and going through all their movements of attack and defense with a fearful truth to nature.” After several minutes, the music suddenly stopped and the dancers dispersed. Then a chief or another warrior entered the inner circle and recounted his exploits for the gathered assembly, before another group of warriors would take their places around the bonfire to perform another dance. In this fashion the celebration lasted throughout the evening and did not end until well after midnight.35

Owing to the onset of an early morning shower, the dragoons did not strike their camp until half past nine on September 1. As they had done before departing the Grand Pawnee village on the Platte, Wharton again ordered Cooke to put the dragoons through several battle formations to impress the Indians. After discharging the howitzers, the major turned the expedition toward the east and ordered the troops to take up the trader’s road to Bellevue on the Missouri River. There, at the outpost maintained by the American Fur Company, the command would be resupplied with enough additional provisions and forage from Fort Leavenworth to complete their homeward march. Although the dragoons would suffer two difficult water crossing, a severe thunderstorm, and an accidental shooting in the days to come, compared to the difficulties previously suffered during the expedition, their journey to the trader’s post on the Missouri was made with uncharacteristic ease.

Over the next few days, as the expedition made its way along the trader’s road to Bellevue, Cooke reflected on the things he had seen and heard while among the Pawnee. Unlike many tribes he encountered, he thought the Pawnee were peaceably disposed toward the United States and its people. The tribe recognized that it was “deriving advantages” from the various
relationships developing with the “Whites.” As a consequence, it was imperative that the government sent only the most qualified men to instruct the tribe. He worried that the agents presently working at the mission were unqualified to execute their duties. In fact, he believed they were causing the disharmony that existed between the northern and southern Pawnee bands, and he further speculated that if officials did not soon address the issue, the rivalries between the leading chiefs could “ripen into hostilities.” Still, in his opinion, what mattered most was that the Pawnee possessed a healthy respect for the authority of the United States: “The Pawnee appear impressed with the proper ideas of the power of the U. States.”

The arrival of the dragoons at the trader’s station on September 6 coincided with the annual dispersement of annuities to the Otoe tribe. At the request of their agent, an impromptu council was hurriedly arranged. Unlike the previous councils with the Pawnee, the meeting with the Otoe immediately assumed a belligerent tone. When advised by their agent of the tribe’s bad behavior, Major Wharton chastised the Otoe for allowing their young men to harass emigrants on the Oregon Trail and for recently killing an Omaha Indian. “Such conduct will not be suffered,” warned the major. The Otoe were a tribe too small to be at war with so many of their neighbors. “You will be then like the lone tree in a far spreading prairie,” he continued, “upon which every storm spends its fury until some blast more powerful than the rest prostrates it upon the earth there to lie and rot.” The major advised the Otoe to stop living by the chase and urged them to become friends with the white man and learn to farm. Game, and especially buffalo, was rapidly disappearing from the region. The Otoe would be forced either to steal or to starve unless they learned to cultivate the soil soon.

Sho-ca-pe, or Big Kanzas, began his rejoinder by telling the assembly of his people to remember the words of Major Wharton lest they be punished. Then, he denied that his people
had killed the Omaha man. Instead, Big Kanzas insisted that the man died because white men had refused to give him shelter during the winter. He was drunk and had no money to buy more liquor, so the white men tossed him outside, and he froze to death. Big Kanzas then pondered why the dragoons had not come to chastise other tribes for killing his people? As a consequence, he felt no need to restrain his warriors: “When the Red people injure me, I retaliate.” Furthermore, he did not feel bound to obey the directives of the Great Father. “You see how my red children look; they are poor because my Great Father does not fulfill his promises,” he declared. “He [the Great Father] took our lands, but what he gave us in return does not keep us from starving.” His people were angry because other tribes were living on Otoe land; yet no one compensated the Otoe. Bitterly, Big Kanzas observed, “My Great Father must think me a little child from the manner he treats me. The other tribes get money enough. We get the same as none.”

Major Wharton’s response was brief and direct. He assured the Otoe that the promises of the Great Father would be fulfilled, provided they stopped committing depredations against emigrants, and they stopped making war against their neighbors. The Great Father wanted the Otoe to be happy, asserted Wharton, but the bad conduct of the Otoe would not be suffered for much longer.

Another Otoe chief, Wah-rah-ni-tha, then rose to declare that his people would starve that winter because the Great Father had not sent his people a blacksmith and a farmer. Again, Wharton’s response was direct: “You had a Smith once who left you because you treated him badly. You had a Farmer & a farm also, but you destroyed the farm & your Great Father took the Farmer away in consequence.” Although the Great Father wished to see the Otoe prosper, he would not permit them to mistreat his white children. The Otoe, however, should not lose heart.
If they ceased their belligerent behavior, the major cautioned, the Great Father might send them another blacksmith and farmer.

Several other Otoe leaders addressed the council, but their remarks differed little from what had already been said. Once the final speaker concluded his remarks, Major Wharton ended the meeting by assuring the Otoe that their words would be heard by the Great Father. He also offered a final admonishment to the assembly, warning them that “the aggressions of a few would be visited on the heads of the whole,” should they continue to molest travelers on the Oregon Trail.38

In spite of the confrontational tone of the council, the dragoons and the Otoe came together that evening to celebrate the gathering of their respective peoples. Once again, the dragoons provided a quantity of pork and flour to feast their Indian guests, and the Otoe performed a war dance to entertain the troops. The celebration, however, could not disguise the disappointment with which Cooke and several other officers viewed the afternoon’s proceedings. The belligerence of their leaders convinced Cooke that the tribe as a whole was hostile toward the United States. It was only their fear of reprisals that prevented the Otoe from openly and more frequently committing depredations against others, especially white emigrants. The Otoe were “a thieving, impudent, silly, reckless people,” who suffered from want of proper leadership. In Cooke’s opinion, their principle chief, Big Kanzas, lacked every quality necessary to be a proper leader: “He has no personal control whatever over his people, and his perfect imbecility, combined with a low cunning which looks only to limited and corrupt popularity, procured by a connivance at any conduct of his people however bad, leaves his office as destitute of a healthy influence as he himself is wanting in personal probity and intelligence.” In fact, Cooke thought Big Kanzas’s influence on his people was so poor the government should remove him from his
position and install a better chief. “Such interference with the affairs of Indian tribes,” Cooke noted, “is not without precedent.”

On Sunday, September 9, Major Wharton kept the expedition at Bellevue to take care of a few logistical matters before starting the final leg of the patrol. Originally, the major intended to depart from the outpost and return to the open prairie in hopes of finding the Lakota. Reliable sources, however, informed Wharton that the Lakota were likely several hundred miles west of Bellevue hunting buffalo. It would be impossible to discover their whereabouts. Although disappointed, the major resolved to seek out the Sauk and Ioway tribes. But he was advised that the country between Bellevue and Fort Leavenworth was nearly impassable due to the excessive flooding of nearly every waterway draining into the Missouri. It would be better for the dragoons to cross the Missouri and march along its eastern bank. Crossing the river meant that Wharton needed to arrange ferriage for the expedition. Cooke noted in the expedition’s journal that the major solved his logistical troubles by purchasing a flat boat. It cost nearly the same as what it would to ferry the expedition across the river. Moreover, once the troops, equipment, and animals were transported to the opposite bank, the boat could float the unnecessary wagons and their surplus cargo to Fort Leavenworth.

The next morning, as the sun was still low in the eastern skies, the dragoons began the arduous task of transferring their wagons, supplies, and equipment across the Missouri River. Major Wharton had hoped to expedite the enterprise by driving the expedition’s animals to the river’s edge and forcing them to swim the expanse. The horses, however, would not enter the stream. The troopers repeatedly attempted to drive the horses into the river, but the animals would not venture more than a few yards into the current. Cooke guessed that the excessive winds and cold water temperatures frightened the animals, but whatever the case, they too had to
be ferried across the river as well. As the small boat could only hold eight to ten animals per
trip, the dragoons spent the majority of their day transporting their stock. By the end of the
day, the onset of a fierce storm ended the operation. Only K Company, its horses and its
commanding officer, and the seven wagons belonging to the Quartermaster Department had
crossed the river.

As dawn broke the following day, Cooke learned the storm that descended on the outpost
damaged the flat boat so severely that it required a total overhaul. Cooke could do little more
than wait and watch from the opposite bank as the dragoons repaired the craft. The river-
crossing did not resume until midday. By dusk, only two additional companies managed to
transport all their equipment, mounts, and supply wagons across the river. Their progress had
been impeded once again by the refusal of the horses to swim the expansive channel.

Although undoubtedly disturbed by the delays, Major Wharton received news during the
morning of September 11 that caused him to be thankful for the slow progress of his troops.
Before the final elements of the dragoons ferried across the Missouri, the major learned of a
foiled plot to rob and murder Lieutenant John C. Frémont and his party of explorers who were
then returning from the Rocky Mountains. According to his informant, one of the fur company’s
factors named Peter Sarpy, the Pawnee interpreter Cleghorn and a group of a dozen Pawnee had
met the Pathfinder while hunting on the prairie. After the encounter, several members of the
hunting party who resided south of the Platte developed the plot and suggested it to their
kinsmen. Without hesitation, those residing among the Loup Fork bands opposed the scheme.
In fact, asserted Cleghorn, the resolve of the Loup Fork Pawnee was so strong they abandoned
their kinsmen and camped with Frémont’s party to ensure the attack did not take place. Under
pressure from Wharton, Cleghorn volunteered that the six Loup Fork Pawnee who protected
Frémont were present, but none of those who had suggested the crimes were present. When Wharton demanded to know the names of the would-be killers, the interpreter hesitantly replied that Cha-ra-cha-rish, Cunning Chief’s son, was the principle instigator of the plot, but he was no longer at the trading post.41

As the Pawnee had recently arrived at Bellevue to receive their annuities, Wharton seized the opportunity to summon the Pawnee to another council. When the tribesmen assembled outside the trading post’s offices, Wharton asked the six Loup Fork Pawnees responsible for preventing the attack to take seats of honor in front of their kinsmen, which the men did nervously. Wharton immediately repeated the plot that Cleghorn had revealed and informed the assembly that the six men had literally saved the Pawnee Nation from annihilation. “Had the proposed acts been committed,” the major announced, “your Great Father would have sent against you a sufficient number of his warriors to have destroyed all of you except those who interposed to save his officers and the party with him.” He admonished the Pawnee to go back and tell their people of their good fortune, and to warn those who had planned the attack that they were even more fortunate. Had Wharton know of the plot when he was in their village, he would have made them prisoners.” Then to show his gratitude to the six men who stood against the plot, Wharton presented each man with a fine blanket and some tobacco. To conclude his remarks, he instructed those present to Cha-ra-cha-rish that he was a coward for running away when summoned to the council.42

At the conclusion of the council, Wharton and the remaining elements of his command finally crossed the river, and after a brief three-mile march, joined Cooke and the balance of the expedition at their camp on Mosquito Creek. A brief, informal council was held that evening with a group of Pottawatomie Indians that happened to discover the dragoon encampment.
Major Wharton complimented them and their kinsmen for the great improvements they had made to the land since their removal five years earlier. Chief Wah-baun-sey, or Day Light, agreed that the improvements were impressive, declaring that the Pottawatomie were endeavoring to do as their agent instructed. He, however, had one complaint he wished Major Wharton would address. “The Ioways are as bad as Whiskey—they destroy our hogs, and I wish they could be taken out of the country... tie them round the neck and take them.”\textsuperscript{43}

On Thursday, September 12, the dragoons started their return march to Fort Leavenworth. Along the way, Major Wharton hoped to hold council with the Sauk and Ioway tribes. Rain fell intermittently over the next several days, which kept the roads traveled by the dragoons in poor condition. Mud continually claimed wagons and delayed the progress of the march. The rain, by this point in the expedition, was also causing the dragoons other troubles. Their tents, from exposure to the rugged wear and tear of the expedition, were no longer weather resistant. Cooke noted that, on September 16, following an early morning shower, he awoke to “a cold bath.”\textsuperscript{44}

Cooke also noted that the quality and the frequency of settlements increased as the expedition traveled farther south along Missouri’s western border. He thought it was because the quality of the land increased. In addition, there were plenty of “fine water courses, which hold out strong inducements for honest, and industrious settlers.” Still he remained somewhat surprised by what he saw, because such “respectable” settlers were not generally found “so near the frontiers.”\textsuperscript{45}

At Iowa Point, on September 17, Wharton discovered a ferry operation and determined to transfer the expedition back to the western bank of the Missouri. Owing to the lateness of the day, the operation would have to wait until the following morning to begin. He also decided to
send the Quartermaster and most of the wagons on to Fort Leavenworth, while he and the
balance of the command held council with the Sauk and Ioway tribes at the Great Nemaha Sub-
Agency.

At six o’clock the following morning, the dragoons began crossing the Missouri once
again. Unlike the painfully slow and difficult operations undertaken days before at Bellevue, the
transfer of men and equipment from Iowa Point was carried off almost without incident. Cooke
noted that each company crossed both its wagons, all its equipment, and all personnel, in less
than an hour. He also credited the speed of the operation to the willingness of the horses to swim
the stream. The only snare encountered occurred when F Company drove its horses into the
river. Cooke recorded that when the lead animal had nearly reached the opposite bank, it
inexplicably reversed its course and started for the bank from which it originated. The action of
this lone animal prompted the rest of the company’s horses to follow suit. The lead horse, then,
emerged from the river in a panic and bolted down the road leading from Iowa Point with all of F
Company’s other horses following. The frightened animals ran for nearly five miles before they
stopped at the edge of the Little Tarquio Creek, where they were rounded up. By nightfall the
entire command—including F Company’s horses—were on the proper side of the Missouri and
encamped seven miles from the sub-agency. Here Wharton planned to host the tribesmen, and
sent invitations to the agent to pass along to the Indians.

The dragoons arose the next morning at the usual hour, and after completing their normal
morning routines, the Quartermaster’s department and half the supply wagons started for Fort
Leavenworth under the protection of a small detachment. As this council would be the last for
the patrol, Wharton had scheduled it to begin around eight o’clock that morning, in order that he
and the balance of the command could also begin their final marches home. The Indians,
however, had yet to appear at the appointed hour, forcing Wharton and the dragoons to wait an additional two hours, until nearly ten o’clock, before they arrived in what Cooke described as “an imposing spectacle.” As was customary, the leading chiefs of the Ioway and Sauk tribes, their agents and interpreters, and the expedition’s officers formed a great circle. Once again, Wharton supplied the chiefs with tobacco for their pipes, and they, in turn, passed them around the circle for everyone to smoke. Although he altered his remarks to suit the Sauk and Ioway, Wharton’s address varied little from what he had said previously to the Pawnee, the Otoe, and the Pottawatomie. Several of the chiefs present thanked the major for his words, but only one, a Sauk chief named Ne-so-quot (Bear that Sits in the Fork of a Tree), made any sort of statement. After telling the major he had fought off some Pawnee, who had attacked him while hunting on the prairie, Ne-so-quot asked Wharton if it was not right to have done so. “The intended to have killed me and tried,” he stated, “did I not do right?” No response was recorded.

Before taking their leave of the sub-agency and resuming their march home, the dragoons executed another series of evolutions that climaxed in a mounted charge. The charge was so effective, according to Lieutenant Carleton, that several warriors thought they were actually under attack and fled on horseback as fast as their mounts would run. For those who remained, a spectacular artillery demonstration followed, including the firing of several rockets. The demonstrations lasted until approximately 2:30 in the afternoon, when the bugler’s call summoned the dragoons to reform their squadrons and prepare to march. At the request of the Indian agent, Major W. P. Richardson, Cooke and his company would remain behind to oversee the disbursement of the tribes’ annuities.

As the dragoons took their leave of the agency, their spirits were high. Fort Leavenworth was only a two-day march from their present location. Although more obstacles would have to
be overcome before reaching their final destination, by this stage of the expedition, the dragoons were seasoned campaigners and the challenges were quickly overcome. Late in the afternoon of September 20, the dragoons fell upon their outbound trail near Clough Creek—the stream named in honor of the private from K Company who died on the third day of the expedition. The following morning, after a brief march of seven miles, Wharton halted the command at Independence Creek for an hour. After forty days on the trail, many of the expedition’s members needed time to shave their campaign beards and police their attire so that they would conform to regulations by the time they entered their home garrison. At Independence Creek, Wharton also divided the command for the last time. Once again, the quartermaster and his wagons would be left behind by the main body of troops to be escorted into the fort by a small detachment of guards. Finally, Wharton led his squadrons onto the Council Bluff road. Fort Leavenworth was only twenty two miles distant, and barring mishaps, it would be reached in only a few hours.

The arrival of Wharton’s dragoons at Fort Leavenworth at four o’clock in the afternoon of September 21, came as quite a surprise to all present at the fort. The approach had gone unreported because the messenger sent by Major Wharton to announce their coming had become lost after leaving Independence Creek.\textsuperscript{49} Still, their homecoming was cause for celebration. The regimental band was quickly assembled to serenade the dragoons as they entered to the parade ground, and a crowd of eager well-wishers quickly formed to welcome the returning troopers.

Modestly, Cooke concluded the expedition’s final journal entry by noting that as the dragoons returned to their “snug quarters,” they could take satisfaction that they had performed their duties with “cheerfulness, and that their occasional difficulties were encountered with zeal.”\textsuperscript{50} Yet the significance of the expedition went far beyond the good-natured performance of their duty. As Lieutenant James H. Carleton noted, after crossing innumerable streams,
traversing endless morasses, and building countless bridges, the members of the expedition had earned “a species of information that can only be gained by absolute labor and experience” during an extended campaign. The skills honed by the dragoons during the expedition would be greatly needed in the coming years as their countrymen continued to seek new beginnings on the continent’s western shores. The demands placed on the nation by westering impulse of its citizens would make the dragoons and their unique skills indispensable components to all efforts to claim the continent.\(^{51}\)

1 Young, Cooke, 137-38.
2 Kearny to Cooke, April 26, 1844, Mss1 C774a 27-30, Cooke Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond Virginia. Young, Cooke, 132-34.
3 For a more detailed discussion of these evolving strategies, see Francis Paul Prucha, The Sword of the Republic: The United States Army on the Frontier, 1783-1845 (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 340-60.
4 Senate Document No. 1, 28\(^{th}\) Congress, 2\(^{nd}\) Session, serial 449, p. 130. As quoted in Prucha, Sword of the Republic, 384.
7 “The Expedition of Major Clifton Wharton in 1844,” Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, XVI (1923-1925), 273. Hereafter cited as “Wharton Expedition Journal.” The authorship of the expedition journal is questionable. Otis E. Young stated that he believed the expedition’s official report was most likely a verbatim copy of Cooke’s diary signed by Wharton. Young declared the style of the official report was “palpably that of Philip St. G. Cooke’s diary” (See Young, Cooke, 139fn.). Comparing the expedition’s journal to Cooke’s other writings, Young’s conclusions are understandable. However, there are equally strong arguments to be made for either Lieutenant James Carleton or Lieutenant Thomas Hammond also authoring the expedition journal. Similarities in language and style appear in all three records. Still, given Cooke’s already well-established habits as a diarist, his literary ambitions, and his years of service with Wharton, the conclusion reached by Young is understandable. Furthermore, this author can find no evidence to contradict Young’s claims to Cooke’s authorship. As a result, quotes taken from the expedition journal will be attributed to Cooke and cited as: Cooke, “Wharton Expedition Journal.”
10 Cooke, “Wharton Expedition Journal,” 273. The authorship of the expedition journal is questionable. Otis E. Young stated that he believed the expedition’s official report was most likely a verbatim copy of Cooke’s diary signed by Wharton. Young declared the style of the official report was “palpably that of Philip St. G. Cooke’s diary.” (See Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 139fn.) Comparing the expedition’s journal to Cooke’s other writings, Young’s conclusions are understandable. However, there are equally strong arguments to be made for either Lieutenant James Carleton or Lieutenant Thomas Hammond also authoring the expedition journal. Similarities in language and style appear in all three records. Still, given Cooke’s already well-established habits as a diarist and his continued literary ambitions, it is difficult to deny Young’s conclusion that credit for the official expedition journal should not be given to Cooke. As a result, quotes taken from the expedition journal will be attributed to Cooke and cited as: Cooke, “Wharton Expedition Journal.”
Expedition Journal,” 297.  

Wharton states that Cleghorn came forward with the information. The expedition’s journal, however, indicates that Cleghorn will be referred to hereafter as “Lod too difficult to imagine him serving as a translator. Cooke possessed a talent for foreign languages and that he translated foreign cavalry manuals as a hobby, it is not logbooks state that a gentleman served as translator, but they fail to mention the name of the many Indians missing an eye, he worried that the expedition might be among the “I prom 


Louis Pelzer, ed., The Prairie Logbooks: Dragoon Campaigns to the Pawnee Villages in 1844, and the Rocky Mountains in 1845, by James Henry Carleton (Chicago: Caxton Club, 1943), 4-6. (Hereafter cited as Carleton, Prairie Logbooks.)  


Young, Cooke, 139-40.  

Carleton, Prairie Logbooks, 5-8.  

Carleton, Prairie Logbooks, 17. Carleton also notes that Rogers was a member of John C. Frémont’s first expedition.  

Carleton, Prairie Logbooks, 16-17.  


Carleton, Prairie Logbooks, 77.  

Carleton, Prairie Logbooks, 77. Carleton adds that many of the Pawnee had lost an eye as a result of the disease, which prompted a rather crude and insensitive joke by one of the expedition’s “gentlemen” that he thought with so many Indians missing an eye, he worried that the expedition might be among the “I-aways,” rather than the Pawnee.  


It is speculation that Cooke translated during the council. Both the “Wharton Expedition Journal” and Carleton’s logbooks state that a gentleman served as translator, but they fail to mention the name of the gentleman. Given that Cooke possessed a talent for foreign languages and that he translated foreign cavalry manuals as a hobby, it is not too difficult to imagine him serving as a translator.  


Carleton, Prairie Logbooks, 98.  

Usarurake’s name is actually translated as “He whose lodge is the Chief one.” For purposes of simplification, he will be referred to hereafter as “Lodge Chief.”  


Carleton, Prairie Logbooks, 102-04.  


Carleton, Prairie Logbooks, 125-26.  


Carleton, Prairie Logbooks, 127.  

Cooke, “Wharton Expedition Journal,”296. Also see, Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 149. Young states that Cleghorn came forward with the information. The expedition’s journal, however, indicates that Cleghorn was anything but forthcoming with the tale. Also, as Cooke was on the opposite bank of the river, Sarpy served as Wharton’s translator during the questioning of Cleghorn and during the subsequent council held with the Pawnee.  

The names of the six Pawnee were: Pe-tal-a-sha-ro (Man Chief), Is-ke-to-pa, Ot-ke-har (Mad Chief), Sha-she-ro-re-ro (Big Chief), Che-yene (The American Chief), and Sta-ro-ta-ca-ro (Frenchman Chief). See Cooke, “Wharton Expedition Journal,” 297-99.  


Cooke, “Wharton Expedition Journal,” 305. Chaplain Ker had been selected to go to Fort Leavenworth ahead of the expedition troops to announce their return. He became lost after taking the wrong trail. Instead of arriving at Fort Leavenworth, he wound up in the Missouri bottom hopelessly confused by a profusion of “cowpaths, cross-tracks, dead logs, and quagmires.” He was the only person reported as missing once the members of the expedition were dismissed.

Carleton, *Prairie Logbooks*, 150.
Chapter Five

“The South Pass Expedition”

The movement of Americans to the far western shores of the continent continued to command the attention of military officials in 1845. In the spring, Captain Cooke learned of another expedition planned by Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, the regiment’s commanding officer who also continued to serve as the commander of the Third Military Department. In the interest of protecting emigrants traveling westward, Colonel Kearny wrote the Adjutant General of the Army to outline his proposals for the upcoming campaign season. In its execution, the expedition would differ little from the patrols conducted by the dragoons each summer for the previous decade. The dragoons would travel into Indian country, hold councils with the tribesmen encountered, warn them against molesting white travelers, distribute presents in hopes of cultivating friendships, and impress upon them the military strength of the U.S. Army. On the surface, there seemed little to differentiate it from previous expeditions. Yet there were elements to the mission proposed by Kearny that immediately caught Cooke’s attention because they differed so greatly from previous patrols.¹

In fact, aspects of the expedition suggested it would be an immensely ambitious enterprise. Kearny, for example, viewed the expedition as an opportunity to conduct a military reconnaissance of the territory through which it would pass. He intended to attach an officer from the Topographical Engineers to the expedition to map and record items of military value. Then, there was the route itself. The expedition would take the dragoons to the very fringes of the American frontier on a circuitous march of more than two thousand miles. From Fort Leavenworth, the colonel purposed to march up the Oregon Road to the South Pass of the Rocky
Mountains—the gateway to the Oregon Territory. Then, reversing his course briefly, he would lead the dragoons southward along the Front Range in modern Colorado to Bent’s Fort on the Arkansas River—the gateway to Mexico’s northern-most provinces. The dragoons would then return to Fort Leavenworth by the Santa Fe Trail.

Yet the expedition planned by the regiment’s colonel was ambitious for reasons not explicitly mentioned. As 1845 opened, the United States was embroiled in two international disputes that threatened to propel the nation into war, or more precisely, two separate wars. The disputes had been triggered by the emigration of Americans into territory beyond the geographical limits of the United States—namely, Texas and Oregon. In the process, the emigrants had cultivated desires within their former homeland to annex these territories. Opposing the acquisitions, however, were Great Britain and Mexico. The former, since 1827, had shared joint-occupancy rights to Oregon with the United States, and the latter maintained its claim that Texas remained one of its provinces. American desires to annex Texas were especially threatening because, after nearly a year of negotiations, the United States government had tendered an offer to the Republic of Texas to join the Union in the spring of 1845—an act which immediately prompted the Republic of Mexico to sever diplomatic relations. Britain, likewise, was eager to protect the fur trade operations of its Hudson’s Bay Company in the Pacific Northwest, and for nearly two decades, had refused to divide its claims on Oregon with the United States by establishing an international boundary through the territory. Just as American efforts to make Texas part of the Union could propel the United States into war with Mexico, efforts to force the settlement of the “Oregon Question,” as the boundary dispute was popularly know, threatened war with Great Britain.
Their opposition mattered little. Americans demanded expansion. It had been the key issue during the presidential elections the previous fall when voters not only proclaimed their desires to possess these territories exclusively, but in effect, declared their willingness to go to war to see their demands met. The Democrats, with their “dark horse” candidate James K. Polk of Tennessee, had fashioned themselves as the champions of expansion throughout the election. In the aftermath of their victory, a demonstration was needed to serve clear notice to Great Britain and Mexico that the United States intended to make good on Polk’s campaign promises to accomplish the “re-occupation of Oregon” and the “re-annexation of Texas.” The new Polk administration would use Kearny’s proposed expedition as a demonstration of its resolve to fulfill its campaign promises to acquire these territories.

Cooke immediately recognized the importance of the mission, in terms of its stated objectives and its more subtle goals. A year before, during his time among the Pawnee, Cooke heard several tales recounting the devastating capabilities of Lakota and Cheyenne war parties and, with his own eyes, he had seen the after effects of their raids. In addition, for more than a year, he heard reports from Indian agents, fur trappers, and others familiar with the region, that described the growing animosities of plains Indians towards the emigrants. According to tribesmen, in the few years since emigrants had begun to cross through Indian country, they had littered the countryside surrounding the trail with garbage, discarded furniture, and the corpses of dead animals. In addition, their herds had consumed the grass to the point it was disturbing the migration patterns of the buffalo. And the excessive hunting of the emigrants was also driving away the other small game that the Indians depended on when camping in the Platte River valley.
More importantly, however, in terms of the nation’s desire to possess Oregon and Texas exclusively, Cooke also recognized the importance of securing the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails against all obstacles. In the event that hostilities erupted between one or both nations, these roads would assume an incalculable strategic value for the United States. The armies sent to conquer either British or Mexican forces would use these thoroughfares to execute their missions. Access to the Oregon Trail was deemed especially important. The uninterrupted flow of emigrants, some officials speculated, could actually prevent war with the United Kingdom because the growing numbers in the disputed territory would eventually settle the “Oregon Question” regardless of the desires held by either Great Britain or the United States. As Cooke later stated, the emigrants “scorn all royal paper claims to this virgin world of ours! The best diplomats of us all, they would conquer the land as easily as,—Adam lost Paradise.”

The expedition proposed by Kearny, therefore, would prove that the United States could send large numbers of troops overland to defend its territorial interests if necessary. Given that civilians, including a number of women and children, had been completing the treks to Oregon and Texas for years, it is difficult to imagine that the success of such an expedition could have ever been questioned. Yet, there was a degree of uncertainty attached to the idea of moving troops such a great distance from their bases of support. After all, armies had to be constantly supplied with food, weapons, and equipment, and doubts abounded as to the ability of the United States to execute such a feat. There were, after all, no military posts west of Fort Leavenworth to offer logistical support to troops venturing beyond the western tier of states. An editor of the Manchester Guardian, for example, speculated that if the U.S. Army sent troops to Oregon, the soldiers might reach the Columbia River, but they would be able to do little more than beg for food and supplies from Hudson’s Bay employees upon their arrival. Kearny’s expedition
sought to demonstrate that troops could not only make the transcontinental march, but that they could arrive in the disputed territory ready for the rigors of combat.

When the orders to begin organizing the expedition arrived at Fort Leavenworth in late April, Cooke also realized the gravity of the upcoming mission by the extreme measures outlined by Kearny to ensure its success. First, Kearny declared he would lead the expedition in person. Second, to reduce government costs and to increase the speed with which the command traveled, the colonel reduced the amount of food, supplies and equipment permitted in the expedition’s wagons. Although enough salt, flour, sugar, and coffee would be taken to supply the expedition, the colonel permitted only a limited quantity of cured meats—seventeen barrels of salted pork and bacon—to be loaded in the supply wagons. Kearny decided to take advantage of the buffalo and other game on the plains, and live off the bounty of the land. Still, aware of the unpredictability of the buffalo, he also purchased a small herd of thirty beef cattle and twenty-seven sheep to supply the command with fresh meat when necessary. The most extreme measure prescribed, however, was his decision to not bring any forage for the expedition’s livestock. They too would be required to live off the land. The colonel believed the oceans of grass that covered the west all the way to the Rockies would alleviate the need to purchase and transport tons of forage needed by the horses, mules, and other livestock that would accompany the command.

After a week-long steamboat voyage, Colonel Kearny arrived at Fort Leavenworth on May 15. With him were his adjutant, Lieutenant H.S. Turner, and the man he had hired to guide the expedition on its transcontinental march, Thomas Fitzpatrick. A veteran of the Rocky Mountain Fur trade and an experienced guide along the Oregon Trail, Fitzpatrick was, as Kearny would later attest, “an excellent woodsmen . . . who has as good, if not a better knowledge of that
country [the Rocky Mountain West], than any other man in existence.9 As the expedition was slated to begin that Saturday, May 17, the scene that greeted Kearny at Fort Leavenworth was one of frenzied activity as the final preparations for the journey were being completed. For the troopers of the five companies assigned to the expedition, these last hours were filled with endless inspections to ensure that they, their horses, and equipment were in peak condition. For the men of the Quartermasters Department, it meant repeatedly going over packing lists to ensure the proper equipment and supplies were accounted for in the seventeen wagons allotted for the expedition. On Friday, however, threatening skies appeared over the western horizon, and the colonel determined that it would be better to allow the approaching storms to pass before beginning the march. Fortunately, the delay caused by the rains lasted only a single day. As dawn broke on Sunday, May 18, the darkened the skies over Fort Leavenworth began to fade, revealing the promise of excellent marching conditions.10

When the bugler’s call of reveille roused the dragoons from their bunks, word was already being passed throughout the fort that the expedition would commence as soon as its troops assembled. Over the next few hours the trumpeting calls of buglers propelled the men of the post through a series of activities until the five companies slated for the expedition stood on the parade field ready for inspection. Satisfied with the martial bearing of his command Kearny issued the order to form a column of twos and move out at ten o’clock. Cooke gave his horse a gentle prompting with his spurs and a slight tug of the reins to bring it forward and begin the exodus from the post. Once again, he and K Company would lead the expedition troops out of Fort Leavenworth and onto the Council Bluffs road.11

In less than an hour, the entire command departed Fort Leavenworth and formed a line that stretched over a mile in length along the familiar byway. Fitzpatrick, the veteran
frontiersman and guide, assumed his position a quarter mile in advance of the column. Kearny and his staff followed. Rather than dividing the column into three parallel squadrons, the dragoons continued to march in a single column of twos. The five dragoon companies were first in line. Each company was composed of fifty soldiers mounted on horses of uniform colors. They were followed by two batteries of twelve pound brass howitzers requisitioned by Kearny to impress and intimidate the Indians. Next in line were the seventeen supply wagons and their detail of dragoons from the quartermasters department. The thirty head of cattle and twenty seven sheep that constituted the expedition’s walking commissary of emergency rations were next. A detail of nine dragoons acted as their drivers. Finally, the expedition’s rear guard marked the end of the caravan. A gap of one hundred paces was maintained between each company of dragoons and between each subsequent division of the column to spare man and beast the choking effects of trail dust. Each day the five dragoon companies rotated to the front of their section of the caravan, as would the supply wagons, to afford each at least one day with the least amount of dust. With over three hundred men, well armed and mounted, the sight of the column stretched along the Council Bluffs road was an awesome spectacle to behold.\(^{12}\)

In only a few miles, the dragoons departed the Council Bluffs road and assumed the trail cut by Major Wharton the previous spring. For the enlisted men who had served under Wharton’s command, returning to the trail undoubtedly called to mind memories of mud-choked passages and disabled wagons that inexplicably caused muscles go tense and ache. Yet, unlike the previous spring, rain had not inundated the Missouri Valley and the exposed earth upon which the dragoon’s traveled remained solid. The improved conditions allowed Fitzpatrick to deviate frequently from Wharton’s trail and lead the dragoons over a more practical line of
march that not only spared the expedition’s horses and mules from the fatigue experienced a year earlier, but also saved the wagons from the damages they suffered as well.

By May 23, after striking a southwesterly course, the dragoons entered the valley of the Little Blue River and, on the following morning, they got their first glimpses of the Oregon Trail from a hilltop offering a commanding view of the valley. “A great thoroughfare,” Cooke called it, “broad and well worn—the longest and best natural road perhaps in the world.” Lieutenant James H. Carleton thought the road equally magnificent: “Without a single branching out to the right or left, [it] extends from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, a distance of over two thousand miles.” The dragoons were 120 miles outside Fort Leavenworth.\(^\text{13}\)

From the hilltop, the dragoons also spied the first of what would prove to be many emigrant wagon trains. Aided by telescopes, the officers with Kearny watched the emigrants move along the trace at a distance of four or five miles. The image of their canvases wagon covers moving through the ocean of prairie grass reminded him of “dim, white spots, sails at sea.” There were approximately fifty wagons in the train, each pulled by two or three yoke of oxen. The wagons were followed by an indeterminate number of loose stock animals: horses, mules, and cattle. Their course was roughly parallel to that of the dragoons, and Kearny immediately adjusted the command’s line of march.\(^\text{14}\)

The appearance of the dragoons delighted and reassured the emigrants. As rumors concerning Indian hostilities were ever-present along the trail, the presence of the military column greatly relieved emigrant anxieties over safety. When asked about the number of wagon trains expected to be making the journey to Oregon that spring, the emigrants responded that there were perhaps as many as three hundred more wagons, or families, ahead of them on the trail. The news immediately gave pause to Kearny, Cooke, and the other officers. In planning
the mission, Kearny had not anticipated the amount of livestock that would be ushered across the continent with the emigrants. Suddenly, the dragoon officers realized that their stock would compete with that of the emigrants for forage throughout their march to the South Pass. No doubt reflecting the thoughts of his fellow officers, Cooke shuddered at the realization that every party of emigrants encountered along the Oregon Trail also would carry sizable herds of livestock. For the dragoon captain, the emigrant herds would be “worse than the myriads of locusts” seen east of the Blue, and he worried that, like the locusts, the emigrant’s cattle “would make a clean sweep of the grass near all the spots where it is necessary to encamp for water.” The realization was especially disturbing because, in the few short miles that the dragoons had been on the trail, Cooke had noticed that the grass through that section of the country was “backward and scanty.” Grass now became as precious as gold to the dragoons, and immediately, Kearny determined to overtake the lead wagon party as quickly as possible.15

Kearny ended the expedition’s first day on the Oregon Trail after an exhausting twenty-six mile march. The quartermaster, however, was unable to locate a campsite with access to sufficient quantities of grass and water. Disappointed, the dragoons countermarched over a mile along their back trail until they discovered a site with enough grass. Yet, in securing grass for their animals, the needs of the dragoons were not considered. Observed Cooke: “Then had the soldiers, weary with the long, slow march, in addition to the usual toils of tending horses, unloading wagons, pitching tents, cooking, &c., &c. . . . [had] to go afoot this long half mile and return burdened with wood and water.” It would be the first of many such inconveniences. Still, ever the romantic, Cooke simply chalked the hardship up to the uncertainty of a soldier’s life while on campaign.16
Over the next few days, the dragoons continued to advance up the valley of the Little Blue. Each day Cooke noted in his journal that the command continued to encounter emigrant parties with large herds following their wagons. On May 26, for example, Cooke recorded that one of the two wagon trains seen that day had one thousand head of cattle in its herd. Again, he worried at the prospects of finding enough grass for the expedition’s herd. As the trail approached the confluence of the Big and Little Blue Rivers, Cooke became keenly interested in the quality of the soil and the condition of its vegetation as the dragoons began to ascend the dividing plateau. The grass, unfortunately, did not improve. Two days later, on May 28, as the dragoons resumed the road along the Little Blue, he observed that the earth was “mere sand—with a soil that scarcely supports their sod.” Fortunately for the expedition’s herd, the dragoons were able to find, through the exploratory efforts of their scout and quartermaster, grass away from the trail. Cooke noted that after turning the expedition down a high bluff, the guide found a “sweet little valley” that appeared to have been spared from the ravenous appetites of emigrant livestock.17

After enduring a violent overnight thunderstorm and a day spent gathering scattered tents and personal items, the dragoons left the Little Blue and ascended the divide into the Platte River Valley on May 31. Warned by Fitzpatrick to expect a dry march, the dragoons were relieved to find a flooded depression near midday. The dragoons, however, could not immediately enjoy their discovery. Gathered around it was yet another train of emigrants and their livestock herd. Cooke counted thirty one men, thirty two women, and sixty one children in the wagon party. Their possessions and provisions were housed in twenty-four wagons. Their herd consisted of two hundred and twenty head of cattle.18
Shortly after resuming their march that afternoon, the dragoons also spotted a group of Indians approaching from the southwest. From their nearly two hundred horses and mules, heavily burdened with hides and packs of dried meat, Cooke immediately recognized that these Indians were returning home after hunting buffalo. Eager to gather intelligence, Kearny called a brief halt so he might conduct an interview. Cooke thought that the colonel was especially interested in speaking with these Indians—believed to be Pawnee—because he had earlier received information from another emigrant party that a group of Indian warriors had “robbed and maltreated” a few straggling members of their caravan.

Kearny’s conference with the Indian leaders, however, was interrupted by the reports of two gun shots from the rear of the column, which hung in the air and unnerved the normally stoic colonel. Originating from where the end of the column stood in proximity to the emigrants, and where the other members of the Pawnee hunting party were then passing, the colonel was extremely troubled because it was impossible to determine who had fired the shots or why. Hurriedly, Kearny excused himself from his interview and raced toward the scene.

When the colonel reached the end of the column, his concern quickly turned to fury. As he approached K Company’s position, he saw a disheveled Cooke inspecting the corpse of a dead dog. Recognizing the angered expression on his commanding officer’s face, Cooke explained that he had fired the first shot in an attempt to scare off the stray because it had been terrorizing a group of grazing mules. Although the shot failed to hit its mark, it had, Cooke thought, chased the dog away. Moments later, however, his horse let out a terrified scream and began to buck wildly. Unbeknownst to Cooke, the dog had crept up on his horse and attacked by “fastening its teeth in the ham” of one of the animal’s back legs. Cooke speculated that the dog had taken offense to the attempt on its life. After regaining control of his terrified mount, the
startled and angry captain whirlèd about, and upon seeing the dog, seized his pistol again and fired the second shot. The explanation did little to soothe Kearny’s anger, and in spite of his long friendship with the captain, the colonel issued Cooke a “stern rebuke” for his poorly timed actions. Cooke, on the other hand, found the incident quite humorous—including the panic he caused his commanding officer.¹⁹

At dusk, the dragoons encamped along the banks of the Platte River across from Grand Island. After picketing their horses the men passed the balance of the evening in an especially pleasant mood. Their spirits had been lifted by a few surprise announcements from their commanding officer. First, Kearny authorized one of the beeves from the dragoon herd to be slaughtered and distributed among the individual company messes for the evening meal. It would be the first fresh meat eaten by the dragoons since departing Fort Leavenworth two weeks earlier. The second cause for the excitement was furnished by the Pawnees. Once Kearny held his interview, he learned that buffalo could be found in abundance only three days march from their present position. And finally, the expedition members learned that the command would remain in camp the next day to let their animals recuperate. The grass along the banks of the Platte was “luxuriant and abundant,” and the commanding officer thought it prudent to make sure the animals were well fed before continuing the march.

Lieutenant Turner considered it a wise decision. Before crossing into the Platte Valley, the lieutenant observed that the expedition’s horses appeared to be suffering most from the lack of forage. It was, according to him, a source of great anxiety for the dragoons because all realized that the command was entirely dependent upon their horses for the successful prosecution of their mission. “The rider feels a deep sympathy with the horse in all his
sufferings & after a day’s march the former will scarcely rest well unless all the wants of the latter have been supplied.”²⁰

Over the next several days, as the dragoons resumed their ascent of the Platte River valley, Cooke noted how strange the country was through which the dragoons passed. It was, to him, utterly featureless: “You may ride all day without encountering an object to break its sameness;—not a tributary—a ravine, a tree.” It was a sentiment shared by the other diarists within the command. Lieutenant Turner, who recorded the expedition’s official journal, wrote several entries over the next few days that declared there was little to distinguish any given day from the one that preceded it. Carleton, whose journal entries would be published serially in newspapers throughout the country, noted only that the Platte Valley was approximately five miles wide and that the river itself was a crystal clear stream that was four or five feet deep with a sandy bottom.²¹

Yet there was one aspect of their march through the Platte Valley that seemed to capture the attention of the expedition’s chroniclers: the wind. On May 31, Cooke observed that a wind began blowing out of the south that did not relent for days. He described the fierceness of the gales as being so strong, that one night, as the wind shifted to the northeast it literally blew the shallow waters of the Platte out of their channel. Where sandbars had stood bare the night before on the south side of the river, they were now covered with water. And, of course, with the wind, came the dust. The gusts kicked up dust on the trail that at times made it difficult to see and breathe. On the day the dragoons resumed their march, Cooke noted that due to the wind and dust, the horses had difficulty maintaining the road. Later he recorded his growing annoyance by describing how the wind, in spite of a rain shower that morning, had picked up enough dust to thoroughly coat everything possessed by the dragoons: their clothes, their blankets, their tents,
everything. A week later he asked, “How strange the eternal wind . . . to what purpose does it
day and night blow . . .”?  

Hour after hour, mile after mile, with little of interest to view, and nothing but the
clanking noise of the equipment strapped to his saddle to listen to, Cooke noted that monotony of
the march gave license to the dragoons to let their minds wander. Like all nineteenth-century
Americans, Cooke viewed the central plains of the American frontier as if they were virgin lands
and he was among the first to see and explore their wonders. Such notions gave occasion for
him to consider the awe with which early Spanish explores, like De Soto, Cortez, and others,
beheld the New World when they embarked on their conquests. The untouched character of the
land also permitted Cooke to dream of ancient campaigns executed by Caesar and Alexander to
broaden the claims of their respective empires. On still other occasions, Cooke simply reflected
on memories of loved ones left behind or long gone. In spite of the fact that he was at all times
surrounded by nearly three hundred other individuals, Cooke dramatically illustrated that life on
the trail was spent largely in solitude.  

Under these circumstances, it was with great excitement that the dragoons witnessed
anything that broke the monotony of their day, and encounters with emigrants soon became
eagerly anticipated events. The dragoons marveled at the hardihood of the emigrants. They
were astonished by the cheerfulness with which the emigrants endured the hardships of their
nomadic existence and the ability of some to blossom under such unconventional circumstances.
The expedition’s journalists recorded with awe how the normal cycles of life continued to occur
in the wilds of the frontier. Marriages that had taken place along the trail were events worthy of
record, as were births and deaths. Carleton, in particular, was inspired by the hospitality
extended to the dragoons by each wagon party they met. “No one could visit the emigrants’
camp at night without being offered the best entertainment their humble means could afford; and when they were on the march, even, they were always ready to share their drink of milk or bit of bread with their fellow travelers—the dragoons.”

Since their first encounter with a wagon party on the trail, the emigrants became the subjects of romantic speculation. It did not matter from where they came or what station in society they occupied in their former lives. The emigrants were children of destiny, whose fate, like that of the nation they represented, had yet to be defined. Who knew, speculated Carleton, what influence these emigrants might one day exercise, “not only on the country they have left behind, but on the world at large.” Cooke cast the emigrants as hearty individuals “led by human instinct” to be the “unconscious workers of National Human Destiny.” He admired their pluck and determination, but pitied them for the hardships and losses they would suffer in their self-imposed exile. Yet, like Carleton, he saw limitless possibilities for the emigrants once they reached their destination. One day, Cooke pondered, one of the many boys seen walking behind his family’s wagon might return to the nation’s capital to take his seat in Congress as “the gentleman from Oregon.”

As the first week in June ended, the dragoons encountered their first buffalo herd near the confluence of the North and South Platte Rivers. The herds came as a blessing and a curse for the dragoons. For the officers, and those enlisted men selected as hunters, the buffalo not only constituted a fresh supply of meat, but a much needed distraction from the otherwise dull routines of a soldier’s day. To break free of the ranks and ride one’s horse pell mell into the midst of the herd, and experience the thrill of the chase and that of bringing down one of the mighty beasts, was a fantasy that each soldier in the column entertained. On the first day, Cooke noted that the urge to participate in the chase spread throughout the column like a fever, making
it nearly impossible for any but “old hands” like him to resist. Still, the captain was unable to
restrain his own love of the chase for very long. On June 5, when a second herd was spotted
foraging the South Platte, he quickly withdrew his trusted Harper’s Ferry “buffalo slayer” from
his mess kit, and mounted a fine brown charger that he had brought along for the exclusive
purpose of hunting buffalo. It would be the first of several hunts enjoyed by Cooke during the
expedition.26

Yet the appearance of the buffalo also meant that the challenge of finding sufficient grass
for the dragoons’ stock herd would only become that much more difficult. Cooke’s daily
observations, like those of Turner and Carleton, repeatedly claimed that grass along the South
Platte was becoming increasingly difficult to find in sufficient quantities to sustain the
command’s livestock. What little grass the dragoons did find was scattered or cropped close to
the ground. Their commanding officer already had resorted to establishing multiple camps along
the river to maximize grazing opportunities for the herd, yet the appearance of the animals
continued to indicate they were suffering from want of food. Thousands of horses, mules, and
cattle belonging to emigrants had already browsed the trail sides, and now the surrounding valley
was being eaten to the roots by possibly millions of buffalo on their annual migrations. With the
vegetation of the valley already in such short supply, the concerns of the dragoons for their
livestock, especially their horses, intensified.27

Entry into buffalo country also brought added dangers for the command. The presence of
the herds so close to the Oregon road meant that the dragoons had to be mindful of their
proximity to the herds. Aside from the obvious danger presented by a stampede, the dragoons
had to be ever-vigilant to prevent their stock from wandering off with the passing buffalo. These
dangers were especially great during the night, when the command slept in their tents and only a
small detachment of guards watched over the camp. Before reveille of June 5, for example, a small herd wandered dangerously close to the dragoon encampment. The buffalo were within one hundred paces of the camp and approaching the expedition’s horses when a mule that had broke free from its tether began to bray in protest. Alerted by the disturbance, the guards raced to stand between the camp and the herd, and then, gave the signal for the command to turn out. The troopers hurriedly gathered their mounts to prevent the horses from pulling their picket pins and stampeding away, which would have undoubtedly caused the buffalo to follow suit.28

After three days along the South Platte, the dragoons crossed the broken terrain dividing the two western channels of the Platte River on June 7. Passing dozens of emigrant wagons along the trail set by Fitzpatrick, the dragoons arrived at the verdant, tree-covered oasis known as Ash Hollow on the North Platte shortly after dusk.29 Although the improved condition of the vegetation afforded the dragoons an opportunity to turn their stock out and graze until the animals were content, Kearny found it necessary to establish two separate camps.30

The next morning Cooke awoke to the enchanting vistas of Ash Hollow. Its “sparkling and rich foliage,” surrounded by white, citadel-like cliffs, were a pleasant contrast to the featureless plains he had so recently passed, and was certain to encounter before the day ended. Regrettably for Cooke, the command would not linger in their tranquil setting, and at the usual hour, the bugles sounded their calls for the dragoons to mount their horse and begin the march. As predicted, the valley of the North Fork of the Platte differed little from that of the South, save the sandy soil and the sparsely covered hills lining the valley. Cooke viewed the valley as “wild and desolate.”31 Still, Cooke noted that if one looked closely, the beauty of the desert readily presented itself. Fragrant blooms of honeysuckles and other delicate flowers filled the air. On June 10, he recorded that he had “discovered” the most beautiful species of cactus that he had
ever seen: a single sphere resting on the ground, with pink inner leaves and outer leaves the color of pale lilac.

The geography of the land also presented wonders that caught his attention. On the same day that he discovered the cactus, Cooke caught his first glimpses of two of the most iconic formations in the West: Courthouse Rock and Chimney Rock. The former was “a hill, or an immense mound, which strongly resembled such a building, with wings.” His description of the latter required less imagination to conjure a mental image: “at a distance of thirty miles; it had the appearance of a tall post seen a mile off.” On June 11, the dragoon captain also saw Scott’s Bluff, which he thought very much resembled the “national Capital,” and he referred to it as a “Nebraska Gibraltar” because of its commanding presence in the valley.32

These days, however, were noteworthy for the dragoons for reasons other than the picturesque scenery. On June 9, the dragoons happened upon several French engagés, whose four Mackinaw boats loaded with buffalo robes had become stranded on the sandbars in the shallow waters of the North Platte. Wading across the stream to meet with Kearny and the other officers, the Frenchmen informed the soldiers that they were employed at Fort Laramie, which was only one hundred miles further up river. When prompted for the whereabouts of the region’s Indian populations, the engagés informed Kearny that a Brulé Lakota village of one hundred and fifty lodges was encamped along the Sand Buttes, fifteen miles north of the river. Delighted with the information, Kearny hired one of the fur traders to go to the village and invite them to attend the council he would hold at Fort Laramie on, or about, June 15. It was also during this stretch of days that the dragoons finally passed the lead emigrant train that had left Independence, Missouri, in April.33
Toward the end of their march on June 11, the dragoons also came upon a small village of twenty-five Lakota lodges pitched in a meadow along the southern bank of the North Platte. Eager to spread the word of the council he planned to hold at Fort Laramie, the colonel ordered his dragoons to establish their camp immediately opposite that of the Lakota. He hoped the presence of the dragoons would intrigue the villagers and lure them across the river. The Indians, however, showed little interest. In fact, their village showed very few signs of habitation. Carleton arrogantly recorded his belief that the Indians’ hesitation stemmed from the fact that it was the first time any of them had seen U.S. troops—representatives of “that power which had swept so many nations of their brethren away, and was now grasping onward toward them, sooner or later, inevitably to crush them in turn.”

Anxious to open communications and spread word of the council he planned to hold at Fort Laramie, Kearny ordered Fitzpatrick to cross the river and coax the Indians to return with him for a parley. Shortly thereafter, Kearny saw his guide returning with approximately one hundred villagers following in his wake. Dressed in their finest costumes, and mounted on their best horses, the forty Lakota men riding with Fitzpatrick charged into the river as if going into battle. The balance of their tribesmen, mostly women and a few children, followed.

Lacking a proper interpreter, the dragoon commander relied on his guide’s limited knowledge of the Lakota language and plains sign language to communicate. Relieved to learn the purpose of Kearny’s mission, the Lakota leadership eagerly agreed to assemble at Fort Laramie for the upcoming council. More importantly, as far as Kearny was concerned, the Lakota agreed to spread the colonel’s invitation to the villages of their kinsmen. Before departing the military camp, the warriors were given a brief tour and showed the various
The howitzers—the long sabers—the carbines, that could be loaded and fired so rapidly—the pistols—the powerful horses, from which they saw there could be no escape—the stalwart and athletic men, who were to ride those horses, and use those weapons, all these things, served to convince them, beyond a doubt, that although their great father had an open hand to give, he also had a strong arm to punish.  

At dawn on June 12, Fitzpatrick led the dragoons away from the North Platte and over Scott’s Bluff toward Horse Creek. Although initially not excited by the prospect of following another rugged and winding trail, Cooke was later enchanted by the panoramas offered by the elevated course around the feature he dubbed “Nebraska’s Gibraltar.” During the late afternoon, after the frontiersman led through a particular gap, the dragoon captain paused to admire a glimpse of the shadowy peaks of the Black Hills, which he estimated to be approximately eighty miles off to the north.

At the end of their descent, Fitzpatrick brought the dragoons to an idyllic location near the mouth of Horse Creek. Grass was plentiful and an abundance of cedar trees provided the dragoons with a now-rare opportunity to build campfires with wood. Yet as Cooke sat in his tent enjoying these comforts, he questioned the wisdom of the emigrants making the trek to Oregon. Were these wagon-bound travelers sacrificing the comforts of home and family to fulfill some unknown national destiny? Or were they motivated by a selfish need, or “a diseased appetite for excitement and change”? After all, was there not still plenty of rich land available in the east to be purchased for the modest price of a dollar and a quarter per acre after a single year’s occupancy?
The motive for Cooke’s speculations arose from a visit by two members of the last wagon party encountered by the dragoons. The two men anxiously questioned Fitzpatrick about the last half of their journey to the Willamette Valley. They were utterly ignorant of the route, and their concerns stemmed from the fact that the first part of their journey—the leg that was supposed to be the easiest to pass—had been accomplished only after surmounting tremendous obstacles. Many of their women wanted to turn back, and at times, so had an alarming number of the men. As Cooke considered their situation, he struggled to understand their rationale for undertaking the journey in the first place. After marching nearly five hundred torturous miles from his home, he no longer saw the emigrants as “the unconscious builders of National Human Destiny.” They were, in his estimation, the victims of a natural instinct to move, to explore, and to seek change. The forces that were bringing settlers to Oregon were the same that had brought Europeans to Plymouth and Jamestown three hundred years earlier. Although he realized that there would be more emigrants plying the trail in the years to come, Cooke could not help but think that it would be better for them to remain in the states. Still he took comfort in a single thought: “Are we not taught to recognize in the history of man, that God shapes evil to good results?” If the motives of those migrating to the Oregon Country were not “pure” or “patriotic,” as Cooke feared, at least in the end, God would set things right.38

The sour mood that fell over Cooke at Horse Creek lingered for the next several days. On June 13, his description of the countryside through which the dragoon marched reflected his discontent: “Twenty-four miles to-day, over a desert . . . hills and river valley equally a desert!” Where he normally found beauty, even in the smallest details of his surroundings, his melancholy made it difficult to discern some praiseworthy aspect of the scenery he witnessed.
The best he could manage was to note that the “gloomy grandeur” presented by an elevated view of the river “lent an element of softening beauty” to the otherwise “sternly sterile plains.”

The march on the morning of June 14 brought the dragoons to the Laramie River valley where two fur trading operations had established outposts a few miles apart. The first encountered was a modest adobe structure called Fort Platte, established by the firm of Mason, Cabanne, and Pratte in 1841. The second was the American Fur Company’s Fort John, founded in 1835, which was more widely known as Fort Laramie. In the few years that Americans had been following the Oregon Trail across the continent, Forts Platte and Laramie had become popular layovers for weary emigrants at the end of the first leg of their journey. In the vicinity of either post, emigrants established camps to rest themselves and their herds, to repair their wagons and equipment, and when possible, to replenish supplies.

That is not to say that the arrival of a large military expedition was not an equally welcomed sight to the proprietors of both trading posts. In fact representatives from each actively sought to increase their profits by courting Colonel Kearny to encamp his command within their respective spheres of operation. Each assured the dragoon commander that the best grass for his livestock could be found closest to their outpost. Initially, Kearny assented to camp at a location advertised by the factors at Fort Platte along the stream of the same name. Upon arrival, however, the dragoons discovered the grass was very poor. Kearny continued his search for adequate forage, and eventually, found a proper grazing site for his livestock along the Laramie River three miles up stream from the American Fur Company’s outpost.

Meanwhile, Captain Cooke rode ten miles—“over desolate hill and plain”—to inspect the post operated by the American Fur Company. The captain’s sour disposition, however, did not improve following his arrival at Fort Laramie. Inside high adobe walls of the outpost, Cooke
found a chaotic blending of ethnicities, languages, and cultures that offended his sense of propriety. “Here, barbarism and a traditional or half civilization meet on neutral ground; but as a struggle, it is certain that the former has the best of it,” he exclaimed. The women he gazed upon were ugly and dirty, and they exhibited the most “revoltingly coarse habits.” The men of the post were little better. Their appearance, in Cooke’s opinion, was as shoddy as their manners. They had the “orthodox,” but were too fueled by “alcohol and gunpowder, avarice, lying, and lust” to claim any position of social superiority. Concluding his observation, Cooke noted: “The struggle is at close quarters; civilization, furnishing house and clothing; barbarism, children and fleas.”

When Colonel Kearny arrived at Fort Laramie later in the afternoon, in all likelihood, he was more disturbed by the crude frontier scene than Cooke. Meeting with the post’s proprietors he quickly made arrangements to store some of the expedition’s excess baggage, and then hired runners to spread word of the council to all the Indian villages in the vicinity. It would convene in two days on June 16. Although short notice, Kearny knew the promise of presents for the attendees would assure a good turn out. In the meantime, the dragoons would remain in their encampment along the Laramie River, guarding their foraging stock and resting from their journey.

The fifteenth was only the second day the dragoons had not marched since leaving Fort Leavenworth. In addition to affording the men the opportunity to bathe and wash their uniforms, the respite also allowed the dragoons to inspect their stock thoroughly. Several animals were becoming lame or showing other indications of breaking down. Rather than risk losing these weakened animals by forcing them to continue, the colonel decided to leave the unfit horses along the Laramie River to recuperate. The factors at both trading forts had warned the colonel
that the terrain would be increasingly inhospitable as the command continued its westward march because of the drought currently ravaging the region. Since the colonel estimated that it would not take more than thirty days to reach the South Pass and return, he thought it better to allow the animals to remain behind and rest. Otherwise, the deteriorating horses would likely need to be condemned within days. To guard the horses and oversee their recovery, Kearny appointed Captain William Eustis of A Company to select a detail and remain along the Laramie River while the balance of the regiment marched to the South Pass.44

When the dragoons arose on the morning of the council, they were greeted by unseasonably cold weather. In fact hints of snow, driven by a fierce north wind, stirred in the air as those selected to attend the council prepared for the brief march to the site outside Fort Platte. On the edge of camp a small escort of dragoons gathered alongside the howitzer battery and the wagons containing the presents for the Indian. The near freezing temperatures made those who would not be making the brief trip to the council site outside Fort Platte glad they would be allowed to remain behind and enjoy the comforts of their warm campfires.

When the detachment arrived at the council site, they noticed that the employees of Fort Platte had made great efforts to prepare the site for the occasion. Three flagpoles stood on the field—two of which flew the flag of the United States, and the other displayed a flag reported to be of Indian design. The employees of the trading post also had constructed a screen to shield the soldiers from the wind. Inside it, the traders spread buffalo robes over the ground as carpets and installed chairs for the officers accompanying Kearny. An estimated twelve hundred Brulé and Oglala Lakota had assembled in front of the screen by the time the dragoons arrived. The principal men from the two tribes were seated in semi-circular rows, with the members of their villages fanning out over the council grounds.
Once the military personnel assumed their seats, Colonel Kearny walked to where the Lakota leadership sat and shook their hands. Then with the aid of M. Bissonet, a Fort Platte trader who would serve as interpreter, the colonel began his address. “Sioux: I am glad to see you,” he announced. “Through your chiefs I have shaken hands with you all.” The colonel then described the mission he and his dragoons were to accomplish before returning to Fort Leavenworth. He declared that the road he and his soldiers were opening for the emigrants must not be closed by the Indians. The emigrants would soon be passing through on their way to the country on the other side of the Rocky Mountains, and there, they would stay. It was imperative that the Lakota did nothing to disturb their progress. “Your Great Father has warriors as numerous as the sands upon the shore of your river,” Kearny warned. “As we have come to you without difficult, so could they.”

The colonel continued his remarks by warning the Lakota to stay away from whiskey. Of all the enemies the Lakota had, it was their greatest. The Great Father did not want it brought among the Indians, but he knew that bad men from New Mexico often brought liquor into Indian country, and it saddened him. “Open your ears now,” Kearny implored, “whenever you find it in your country—no matter in whose possession—spill it all upon the ground. The earth may drink it without injury, but you cannot.” Finally, Kearny told the Lakota that their Great Father was their friend and would continue be their friend, “as long as they behave themselves properly.”

Bull’s Tail, a leading chief of the Brulé, who Cooke thought to be “gentlemanly and mild-looking,” stood and spoke for the assembled tribesmen. He stated that the words of the colonel were good. He was glad to know that if his people treated their “white brethren” good, in return, they would be treated well and receive more presents, like those the colonel was about to distribute. “Now I have found a father,” the chief concluded, “my people will no longer think
of dying . . . They will long remember the words you have this day spoken to them; and as you have said, so, always they shall do.” Others among the Lakota stood and spoke, following Bull’s Tail. In substance, however, they merely echoed the chief’s sentiments regarding Kearny’s address.

When all the speakers concluded their remarks, Kearny ordered the wagons brought forward so that the presents could be distributed. Seven warriors appointed by the chiefs, then, received the gifts and distributed them to the women of their villages. Cooke found it curious that among all the presents given out that day, the one the men prized most were the mirrors. Like most nineteenth century Americans, he misunderstood Lakota culture and the reasons why the men placed such high value of these object he considered to be so feminine: “their women work and drudge; their men idle, and have more use for mirrors in self-adornment.” As the distribution of gifts continued the Lakota people began singing their “Song of Thanks.” It was, Cooke thought, “a very fine musical effect . . . expressive of satisfaction and thanks.” Finally, before the gathering dispersed, Kearny ordered the howitzers unlimbered and fired several shots for the amusement of the gathered tribesmen. Then, he informed the Lakota that once night fell, he would send “stars to the heavens” to tell the Great Spirit of the words exchanged that day at the council—meaning he would fire some rockets into the night sky.45

The weather remained unusually cold on the morning of June 17, as the dragoons began their march to the South Pass. To add to the discomfort of those making the journey, an icy drizzle was falling that collected on the uniform coats worn by the dragoons, which, when combined with the wind, made the day seem colder than what it was. In fact, had it not been for the calendar’s declaration that it was June, the dragoons would have thought they were on a winter campaign as they rejoined the Oregon road.
After ten miles, Cooke turned his horse out of the ranks to reconnoiter the area surrounding a small stream called Warm Spring. The location had been recommended earlier as a suitable location for a military post, and it fell to Cooke to evaluate the site to see if it would meet the needs of the army. For several years, an element within the national legislature had repeatedly called for the construction of military posts along the Oregon Trail to protect emigrants from the perceived threat of Indian violence. Although Kearny did not personally endorse the strategy—believing that such a post would be an unnecessary drain on the national treasury—his orders directed him to seek out a possible location in the vicinity of Fort Laramie that might prove suitable for such an instillation. Cooke’s reconnaissance, however, found that the site lacked the natural recourses the army would need to construct and maintain a post. As Colonel Kearny would later state in his report to Adjutant General Jones, there would be an “enormous expense” to maintain a post at the Warm Springs location. Furthermore, importing the materials to build the post, and keep it supplied, would be extremely costly to the government because everything would have to be transported to the location overland. The region’s river systems could not be depended on to support the movement of steamboats throughout the year.⁴⁶

After an exhausting twenty-six-mile ride, Cooke found the dragoons encamped in a lush pasture along Horseshoe Creek. The white tents of the command formed a perfect rectangle across a bend in the waterway that was lined with green trees. The camp’s location stood in pleasant contrast to the “broken and desolate country” through which he had traveled. Although he had marveled at the “striking views” occasionally offered by distant mountain ridges, on the whole, it had been a journey through territory best described as possessing “gray sterility.”⁴⁷

The command enjoyed a comparatively brief march on June 19—only fifteen miles—before establishing their camp in a pleasant meadow along the North Platte. As the soldiers were
setting up their tents, however, someone noticed something unusual moving about the bushes on the edge camp. Upon closer inspection, the dragoon discovered a “famished” Indian woman and two children, and brought them before Colonel Kearny. Employing Fitzpatrick’s knowledge of Indian sign language, the dragoons learned that the three of them had, until a few weeks ago, been held as a prisoner by a Lakota war party. She and the children had been traveling with their Arikara families when the Lakota fell upon their camp near the headwaters of the Missouri, killing all the men in her party, including her husband. She, the children, and the other survivors were then taken captive. The woman explained that the Lakota had released her and the two children, her daughter and a nephew, because they were Arapaho—a tribe allied to the Lakota. Her captors furnished her with supplies and a dog to carry them on a small travois, but following her release, she had become lost. Having exhausted her supplies, she had since killed the dog and been rationing its meat to keep her and the two small children alive.

Touched by the harrowing story of the Arapaho woman, Colonel Kearny ordered the trio fed and directed that they be returned to Fort Laramie the next day. An escort would be provided for them to insure they arrived safely at the trading post. The colonel also assured her that when the dragoons returned from the South Pass, they would collect her and the children, and return them to her people.48

The following afternoon, a private fell victim to a fairly common but gravely serious accident. Near dusk, a trooper from G Company, Private Smith, accidentally shot himself while carelessly handling his carbine. He had leaned the loaded weapon against an Artemisia bush while picketing his horse. When he attempted to retrieve the rifle, he grabbed it by the muzzle, which was pointed at him, and as he pulled, it discharged. The ball entered his right arm above the wrist, and passed savagely through his lower arm, until exiting near the elbow. To Private
Smith’s great misfortune, the projectile mangled the bones along its trajectory, and within a few days, the regimental surgeon was forced to amputate the soldier’s arm. The severity of the soldier’s injuries convinced Kearny that it would be an act of cruelty to bring the wounded trooper with the column to the South Pass. Instead, the colonel permitted the surgeon and seven dragoons to remain behind and nurse the injured trooper. Once Smith recovered, the detachment was to return to the expedition’s horse camp along the Laramie River.49

Over the course of the next few days, the dragoons continued to wind their way over the arid broken terrain of the North Platte Valley. Unlike the plains crossed during the first day, the land seemed to once more capture Cooke’s interests. The trail set by Fitzpatrick led the dragoons past fantastically shaped sandstone rock outcroppings, and over elevated ridges that exposed distant mountain peaks, before descending into quiet valley meadows lined with cottonwoods and willows. It was, in Cooke’s opinion, nature in its most sublime qualities. His spirits were also lifted by hunting opportunities once the dragoons reentered buffalo country. When the column crossed into the Sweet Water Valley, on June 24, he marveled at the solemn appearance of Independence Rock, which already served as a register for countless individuals who had preceded him on their way west.50

Although Cooke once again discovered his love for the rugged beauty of the frontier, the country through which he and the dragoons traveled had become increasingly dry and devoid of vegetation. In fact, as the dragoons continued to climb toward the continental divide, rock, gravel, and sand seemed to be the chief characteristics of the land. The changing nature of their surroundings—its increasingly dessert-like appearance—convinced Colonel Kearny that it would be best to make further alterations to the command. Several horses were becoming lame and the increasingly sandy composition of the road made it exceedingly difficult for the mules to pull the
supply wagons. Furthermore, the scarcity of proper vegetation was again taking its toll on all the expedition’s livestock—especially the cattle. To spare his stock further injury and undue fatigue, Kearny left the lame horses in his command, as well as the balance of the expedition’s livestock and wagons, under guard along the Sweet Water.\textsuperscript{51}

The dragoons reached the South Pass on June 30. To Cooke there seemed little to distinguish it from the “lofty, barren solitudes . . . already described.” When the column crossed over the gently sloping plain that marked the continental divide and the command’s entry into the Oregon Country, there was no great natural feature to herald their milestone, save the discovery of a small stream that flowed toward the west. But that fact alone was enough to thrill Cooke. Standing on the backbone of the continent, Cooke wrote, “A continent is spread beneath me.” In the course of a single day, he drank from the waters of the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. As it was the last day of the month, Colonel Kearny marked the command’s success by holding a troop muster. The expedition members would have the distinction of being the first U.S. troops mustered on the Pacific side of the continent.\textsuperscript{52}

Not wishing to linger any longer than necessary, at seven o’clock the next morning, July 1, Colonel Kearny gave the order for the dragoons to mount their horses, form a column of twos, and put Oregon to their backs. Although filled with pride over their accomplishment, the dragoons were more excited by the knowledge that they had completed the first objective of their mission, and were now beginning their homeward march. It did not matter that their return march would require nearly sixty more days, or that more than a thousand miles of rugged territory still lay before them. They were on their way home, and that knowledge alone, fortified their spirits.\textsuperscript{53}
The dragoons retraced their way along the Oregon Trail toward Fort Laramie. Unlike their outbound journey, however, the dragoons no longer enjoyed exclusive access to the road or the limited resources surrounding it. On July 3, the first of the emigrant wagon trains appeared as the expedition neared Independence Rock. Lieutenant Turner noted that the emigrants still appeared to be in “good spirits,” but he thought that the women were “not quite as cheerful” as they had been when first encountered. These women, the lieutenant determined, were “sad at seeing our faces turned towards the homes, which, in many instances on the part of the females, had been abandoned with regret.” Cooke agreed and recorded that the sight of the dragoons caused one of the woman he saw to break into tears. He reasoned that the sight of the soldiers returning to the east was simply too much for her to bear, especially in light of the fact that she had nothing but “wilderness” before her.\(^{54}\)

The following morning, the dragoons lingered near Independence Rock to celebrate Independence Day with the emigrants they had shared the valley with the night before. As the sun rose, the colonel ordered the howitzers brought forward, and to the delight of the gathered civilians, ordered several shots fired into the surrounding hills. The artillery bursts created terrific explosions among rocks that were enhanced by a “glorious confusion of sounds” made by the shell’s repercussions echoing through the valley. For more than a few soldiers, however, the greatest glory of the morning came when a few of the emigrants quietly passed their jugs of homebrew to toast the holiday. Cooke noted that when one of the leaders of the emigrant party offered the colonel a celebratory swig, he politely declined stating that he never drank anything but “Sweet Water.” Although Cooke was no teetotaler, he too declined to partake of the emigrant’s stock of corn liquor and concluded his journal entry by noting that the holiday had been “a dry one”—at least for him.\(^{55}\)
Beginning on July 5, the dragoons began a series of endurance-challenging marches designed by their colonel to return the column to the Laramie River valley as quickly as possible. Along the way, the column picked up the detachment left along the Sweet Water to guard the lame horses, supply wagons, and cattle herd. While pleased to see that the horses and mules had nearly recovered, the cattle remained disappointingly thin. Although the command continued to follow the Oregon Trail throughout most of its return march, the continued presence of the emigrants—and their herds—occasionally compelled Kearny to seek alternative routes in order to find sufficient forage for its livestock. On July 8 and 9, for example, Kearny, once again, divided the command in order to maximize grazing opportunities for the expedition’s hungry livestock. He ordered the wagons and cattle herd to continue along the trail, while he and the five dragoon companies followed Fitzpatrick through the more rugged, but comparatively untouched canyons and meadows hidden within a complex of sandstone elevations formed by the course of the North Platte called the Red Buttes.

After resting along Deer Creek on July 10, Colonel Kearny drove his dragoons over the next three days until they neared the confluence of the North Platte and Laramie Rivers. Then, as the command approached the American Fur Company’s outpost on July 13, Kearny ordered Fitzpatrick to lead the column toward the southwest in order to bypass Fort Laramie and take a more direct route to the horse camp of Captain Eustis. As the dragoons progressed through the rolling foothills west of the trading post, however, they became increasingly disturbed by the unmistakable signs of a wildfire burning in the valley ahead. Unsure of what to expect as they crested the final ridgeline that overlooked the river, the dragoons were shocked to see Eustis’s camp nearly surrounded by flames. Although the camp was tucked away in a horseshoe bend of the Laramie, and did not appear to be in eminent danger, the sight of the flames in such close
proximity to their destination left many within the command feeling very ill-at-ease. Cooke recorded that upon their arrival in Eustis’s camp, he directed efforts to fight the fires, but the blaze was too extensive to be extinguished and the fire crews were soon recalled.56

Convinced that the river would serve as a protective barrier against the flames, the weary veterans of the South Pass march nervously went into camp alongside Eustis’s detail. Not surprisingly, once Kearny learned that the horses and mules under the captain’s care had recovered, he directed the command to be prepared to move out in the morning. Four more wagons were now empty and no longer of use to the expedition, and the colonel determined that they should be sent back over the Oregon Trail to Fort Leavenworth under the protection of an escort of twenty-three dragoons. In addition to delivering reports on the expedition’s progress, and an assortment of hastily written letters to loved ones back home, the detail would also take the unfortunate trooper that had lost his arm back to Fort Leavenworth. Cooke noted that since his accident, the poor man had endured another operation that required more of his arm to be amputated. Amazingly, the trooper was doing well.57

Also doing well were the Arapaho woman and her two children. Since her arrival at the dragoon’s horse camp, they had improved greatly in their appearance and spirits. To Cooke they appeared to be “fat and flourishing.” The children, in fact, seemed to be thriving. Cooke thought them to be “unusually handsome and intelligent,” and observed that they were “quite petted by the soldiers.” The woman also appeared to be doing exceptionally well among the dragoons—so much so, in fact, that she refused to join a party of Lakotas that offered to take her to her people. In addition to the fact that she had been treated so kindly by the dragoons, Lieutenant Turner suspected the woman made her choice because the Lakota only wanted to take her in order to “require a handsome reward for her delivery.”58
After an uneasy night spent watching the line of flames come precariously close to the river’s edge, Cooke was eager for the command to begin its march to the Arkansas River as the sun rose on July 14. Their departure, however, was delayed because several wagons sent to Fort Laramie the night before had yet to return with the baggage that had been stored there while the command was away at the South Pass. The source of Cooke’s anxiety came from the opposite bank of the Laramie River. There the towering cottonwoods, which seemed to Cooke to have stood sentinel over the river since the dawn of time, were now alight and their contribution to the inferno sent embers dangerously adrift on the wind. Still, the morning progressed in the usual fashion for the dragoons. The horses were attended, breakfast was eaten, and the equipment was beginning to be packed, when suddenly, frantic shouts that the fire had jumped the river filled the encampment. Within moments, men raced about gathering the horses and livestock and whatever loose materials they could. Yet, the drought conditions had turned the valley into a tender box and flames were soon racing over the ground. Several articles of equipment were lost to the rapidly moving fire. Finally, Cooke noted: “The trumpets blare, and we gallop forth to leap the girdling flame, and pass the blackened but still fiery space beyond.” Fortunately, none of the soldiers and none of the animals were harmed by the fire, but the dragoons were forced to move out before being entirely prepared.  

Behind Fitzpatrick, the column marched six miles up the Laramie River to get away from the flames. Compared to the charred remains of their former campground, the site where the dragoons established their new camp was a lush garden. To Cooke, it seemed to be a veritable paradise where the command’s horses and livestock could be turned out to graze and the preparation for the march to the Arkansas could be resumed without worry.
While Cooke sat in his tent tending to his journal, the Brulé chief Bull’s Tail arrived unexpectedly in the dragoon’s camp and made a rather stunning request of Colonel Kearny. The old chief informed the colonel that Mexican traders regularly brought whiskey into Lakota territory and more was expected to arrive. Bull’s Tail worried because of the effects the drink had on his people, and he wanted the colonel to give him a piece of paper—a license, in effect—that authorized him to destroy the liquor he found in his country. Pleased by the request, the colonel immediately drafted the document: “All Indians—Sioux & others, are hereby authorized & requested to destroy any & all spirituous liquor which they may find in the Indian country without respect to the quantity, or the persons in whose possession it may be found.”

The request by Bull’s Tail must have come as a small comfort to the colonel. Since holding the council weeks earlier, Kearny had received reports from emigrants that several of their horses had been stolen by Indians since departing Fort Laramie. Most of these reports fixed the blame for the thefts with the Lakota. Still, the apparent desire of one of their principal leaders to stop the flow of liquor gave Kearny a glimmer of hope. Whiskey remained, as it always had been, a terrible scourge on the Indians. Not only did its use by unscrupulous traders allow Indians to be cheated during negotiations for their furs, it was the source of innumerable tragedies in nearly every village that had been visited by a trader hauling a keg of whiskey in his wagon or tied across the back of his pack mule. Too often celebrations fueled by alcohol supplied by traders turned violent, and then deadly for the tribes. Furthermore, Kearny would have felt little sympathy for anyone caught by the chief attempting to bring whiskey into the Indian country. To do so was a blatant violation of the Indian Intercourse Act of 1834, and the colonel believed that too many individuals were escaping justice thanks to the distance of their crimes from courts in the East.
After passing a quiet night along the Laramie River, the dragoons arose with the sun on July 15 and set out for Bent’s Fort. With Fitzpatrick in advance to mark their course, the column turned toward the south and began climbing the broken country between the Laramie and Chugwater Valleys. Cooke was struck by the stark appearance of the countryside. It somehow looked drier and more barren than any stretch of land seen since leaving the South Pass. He saw little grass during the march over the divide, and once the column descended into the Chugwater valley, the terrain became nearly devoid of all vegetation. Most disturbing of all, however, was his discovery that the stream was bone dry. Equally troubled by the arid conditions of the valley was Lieutenant Turner. Surveying the area as the column advanced nineteen miles up the dry streambed, the lieutenant concluded that it had been several weeks since any rain had fallen in the area.

On July 16, the dragoons continued to ascend the Chugwater. Both Cooke and Turner noted that rain clouds were slowly drifting toward the valley, and like nearly every member of the expedition, both officers eagerly anticipated a refreshing shower. The clouds, however, withheld their rains. But, as the morning passed, the attentions of the dragoons were diverted by their encounter with a small village of Cheyenne Indians. Since returning from the South Pass, Colonel Kearny had received emissaries from the tribe expressing the desires of their leaders to meet with him in council. Realizing that the invitation presented him with another opportunity to spread his government’s message to another tribe deemed potentially hostile to western emigration, Kearny eagerly accepted the offer. More importantly, the site where the Cheyenne established their village appeared to be an oasis through the dry, dust-filled eyes of Cooke. From the banks of the Chugwater, which were shaded by groves of box elders and willows, thick green
grass spread across a broad meadow that would provide the expedition’s famished livestock with a good meal before the dragoons resumed their march.

Leaving the expedition’s livestock to graze under the watchful eyes of the junior officers and enlisted men, Kearny and his troop commanders entered the Cheyenne village alongside five warriors who had ventured out to greet the dragoons. From the appearance of the Indians in the village, Cooke thought the Cheyenne were an especially handsome people who were “mild and amiable” in their manners. Noticing a group of women who were busily engaged in the ornamentation of a buffalo robe, he was impressed by their needlework as well as their modest comportment. Yet, what seemed to impress him most were the structures in which the Cheyenne lived. After entering the lodge of a young white man who had married into the tribe, Cooke became fascinated by its simple, yet durable design. Built by stretching the cured hides of twenty buffalo cows around a dozen or more lodge poles, Cooke noted that it was weatherproof and spacious—easily accommodating him and the other officers, not to mention several members of the tribe who had joined them for refreshments. Best of all, the structure was portable. “When his summer carpet . . . wears out, how easy to move to another,” observed Cooke.

The council was held in a clearing outside the village. Several buffalo robes had been spread like carpets over the ground and a few shades had been set up on tripods to screen the assembly from the afternoon sun. Kearny’s remarks differed little from those delivered to the Lakota outside Fort Platte a month earlier, and as can be imagined, the responses of the assembled tribesmen differed little from their Lakota allies. As Kearny spoke, however, Cooke studied the twenty five Cheyenne men gathered for the council. To him they appeared to be the truest children of nature, barely touched by the contaminating hand of civilization, and he envied
them. Singling out their fondness for “our caps of fur,” Cooke concluded, “happy for them, if they remain far distant from whites, and follow no less innocent fashions than that of a headdress!”

In only a few hours, the dragoons concluded their business among the Cheyenne. Before taking their leave, Kearny issued presents to the tribe and offered assurances that he would send their words to the Great Spirit in the form of stars that evening. The dragoons then reformed their column and moved out. Their course continued toward the south throughout the remainder of the afternoon. Climbing out of the Chugwater valley, the command began crossing the vast open plains of modern Wyoming. Cooke noted that in spite of the openness of their position, their ability to see their surroundings was limited by the drifting clouds of prairie fire smoke that hung like a shroud over the plains several miles in advance of their march. Still, the command pushed on, occasionally crossing still smoldering patches of ground, until it reached a branch of the Horse Creek. It too was dry, and the dragoons resorted to digging wells in the streambed in order to find water.

After the dragoons went into camp along the Crow Creek on July 18, several riders were seen approaching on horseback. Initially, the horsemen were thought to be a group of hunters that had become lost the day before. Instead, the riders turned out to be a group of Arapahoe Indians. They had seen rockets sent into the sky by the dragoons as a beacon for the lost hunter, and had ventured onto the plains to investigate. Amazingly, at least two of the Arapahoe knew Fitzpatrick: a young man named Friday and his “father.” Fitzpatrick had found Friday as a child, lost and nearly starved, and had turned him over to the Arapahoe. They had eagerly agreed to welcome the Arapahoe woman and her two children into their band, and she tearfully accepted their kindness.
Over the next few days, the dragoons continued to struggle over the arid, drought-stricken, and frequently charred plains as they made their way toward the South Fork of the Platte River. Although Cooke did not realize it at the time, the dragoons were about to undergo the most challenging section of their march. The country through which they traveled would continue to test the endurance of the men and animals of the expedition. The two most important things needed by the dragoons while on campaign were grass and water. Yet, the two were almost never found together. As Cooke observed on July 19, after marching along the Crow Creek for nearly twenty-six miles, “where we touched it, if we found a little grass, there was no water; if water there was no grass.” In fact, on at least two occasions the dragoons were forced to dig wells in dry streambeds in order to find water. Nature, it seemed, was playing a cruel joke on the dragoons for their trespass.

By July 20, the dragoons had forded the South Platte, and three days later, were making their way up the banks of Cherry Creek near modern Denver, Colorado. Along the way, Cooke observed the deserted ruins of several trading forts. Given the desolate condition of the land, he could only speculate as to why anyone would have attempted to establish a business in these inhospitable locales: “I only wonder that man could be tempted to tarry here, where animals come not even for security.” Truly, he concluded, if the dragoons had ever been in a desert, they were in one now: “it is certainly a barren, desolate country: we come hundreds of miles, and see scarcely an Indian, or an animal; it is in fact a desert.” Nearly two weeks had passed since the dragoons had seen buffalo, and Cooke estimated that the command would not encounter the herds again until it was well east of Bent’s Fort. This realization was the source of great concern for the dragoon captain. Rations for the command were becoming critically low. If game was not encountered soon, the colonel might be forced to put the command on reduced rations in
order to insure the expedition did not run out of food before reaching the trading post on the Arkansas. 67

Partial relief for the dragoons came on July 24 as the command climbed the highlands between the Platte and the Arkansas valleys. Cooler temperatures, green mountain meadows, and crystal streams greeted the weary soldiers as they advanced into the shadows of Pike’s Peak. Best of all, as the column ascended the foothills of the Front Range, oaks and firs grew in abundance to offer the soldiers additional screens against the sun’s glare and heat. When the dragoons established their camp in a pleasant dale near a small lake at the end of their march, Cooke noted, “all was fresh and pure.” Surveying his surroundings, the captain thought it rude that he and his fellow soldiers should defile such a pristine setting. They were the harbingers of a civilization destined to occupy the region, and with their arrival the destruction of the natural beauty that surrounded them was assured. 68

To Cooke’s great dissatisfaction the dragoons exited their wooded sanctuary too soon. The course over which Fitzpatrick led them returned the dragoons to the exposed vastness of the plains the following day. Using a grove-studded stream named Fontain qui Bouille, the dragoons left the highlands and entered a cactus covered flat that was occupied primarily by prairie dogs. Then on July 26, Kearny ordered the guide to strike a course nearly due east to hasten the expedition’s arrival at Bent’s Fort. The command, by now, was nearly out of rations. There were very few beeves left in the herd, and only enough flour remained to supply the command for four days. Kearny hoped to resupply at Bent’s Fort. A contract had been made with Bent to deliver a month’s worth of rations for three hundred men when Cooke expected to winter at the trading post in 1843. As Cooke had never returned to the post, Kearny hoped the
rations remained undisturbed in the trading post’s warehouses. Otherwise, the expedition might be in dire straits.\(^{69}\)

As the column cleared the final barrier of hills to enter the Arkansas valley, Cooke paused for a moment to study his surroundings. In the distance ahead, the captain saw the river’s course, which was marked by stands of trees on each bank that were so thick they nearly obscured all views of the stream. On the far shore, rested another country, “Mexico, or perhaps Texas,” and just beyond were the Spanish Peaks: a final monument to the once mighty empire Spain possessed in the New World. The realization of his proximity to another country prompted Cooke to speculate on the difficulties that existed between Mexico and the United States when the expedition left Fort Leavenworth. Cooke recalled that “there was every prospect of war with Mexico,” and he wondered about the developments that had taken place in the two and a half months since the expedition began. Denied letters from home, newspapers, or additional instructions from the army, the soldiers could do little more than speculate as to the state of affairs. The possibility that war had been declared during their absence seemed so likely to Cooke and several other members of the command that none would have been surprised to find orders directing the dragoons to begin the conquest of New Mexico waiting at Bent’s Fort. “We have some idea of meeting orders, to keep our course south to Santa Fe.”\(^{70}\)

On July 29, the dragoons made their final push toward Bent’s Fort. Mirroring the course of the Arkansas River, the dragoons advanced over the rolling plains of modern southeast Colorado. Unlike the proceeding days, which Cooke thought to be excessively hot, the day began with a pleasant breeze that seemed to lift the spirits of men and their horses. Within a few hours of breaking camp, the dragoons came across a group of travelers and a single wagon moving westward along the river. Suspicious of the presence, Colonel Kearny ordered one of his
officers and a detail to go inspect the wagon. Undoubtedly thinking the travelers were fur traders up from New Mexico, the colonel likely wished to discover whether or not they were attempting to violate the Indian Intercourse Act by bringing whiskey into Indian country. The colonel’s suspicions were proven to be well founded after his men uncovered a barrel and a half of Taos whiskey concealed in the wagon. Without hesitation, the colonel ordered the whiskey destroyed and the men arrested. They and their wagon would join the dragoons and go to Bent’s Fort.  

Near midday, as the command passed over a series of low hills, the dragoons caught their first glimpse of Bent’s Fort. Although it was still several miles away, Cooke thought it a rather spectacular site. Located on a broad flat above the river’s floodplain, the outpost, which proudly displayed the national flag flying over its imposing adobe walls, assumed a distinctly military appearance that was accentuated by two large towers at opposite corners of the post’s walls. Quickening their pace, the dragoons were further excited by the reception that awaited their arrival. As the column neared the fort, cheers erupted from a disorganized assembly of men atop the fort’s walls and a small swivel gun saluted the arrival of the column with three discharges. Indeed, it was a hardy and most unexpected welcome.

After establishing their camp a couple of miles downstream, Colonel Kearny and several officers, including Cooke, returned to the trading post. Although invited to dine with the chief proprietors of the post, George Bent and Ceran St. Vrain, the initial concern of the officers was to inspect the rations purchased by Cooke two years earlier. All were greatly relieved to learn that the rations remained undisturbed in one of the outpost’s warehouses. Immediately, Kearny directed his quartermaster to bring his wagons to the fort and gather enough rations to distribute among each company a supply to last twenty four days—the number of days estimated to march the final leg to Fort Leavenworth. The balance of the rations would be left in the warehouse to
supply the exploratory party headed by Lieutenant John C. Frémont, which Colonel Kearny learned was expected to arrive any day. The rations, Kearny knew, would be equally valued by the Pathfinder who was to begin his third expedition from Bent’s Fort. Unfortunately, the desires of the dragoons for news went unfulfilled. No orders awaited them, and in the entire fort, not a single newspaper could be found with a publication date more recent than May 26—a mere week after the expedition had set off. Thus, it likely came as no surprise when Colonel Kearny issued orders for the command to be prepared to move out on the following morning. The dragoons would not linger at the post to meet Lieutenant Frémont and his party of explorers.\textsuperscript{73}

With the bugler’s call to reveille, the dragoons arose and began preparations to start the final leg of their journey to Fort Leavenworth. Before departing, however, Colonel Kearny and a detail of dragoons returned to the trading post to attend to a few last minute details. The proprietors of Bent’s Fort had agreed to exchange a few of their horses for some had by the dragoons that were judged too “jaded and broken down” to complete the march. The colonel also needed to conclude matters with the traders arrested the day before. Unsure of the legalities of bringing the men back to Missouri to face trial, the colonel decided to expel the traders from U.S. territory. After securing their promises to return directly to Taos, New Mexico, the colonel ordered the detail to escort the traders across the Arkansas River into Mexican territory. Although Kearny was not entirely satisfied with the solution, he considered his decision the best course action under the circumstances.\textsuperscript{74}

At 7:30 the dragoons followed Fitzpatrick onto the highlands above the river’s floodplain and onto the Santa Fe Trail. The morning was bright and pleasant, and the soldiers could not help but comment on the lushness of the valley through which they were traveling. It stood in such stark contrast to nearly every stretch of country through which they had traveled since
leaving Fort Leavenworth nearly three months ago. Cottonwoods and willows stood in thick
groves along the riverbanks and on the islands that frequently appeared in the stream. Yet it was
the grass that caught the attention of most. It covered the valley like a fine green carpet. Even
the plains extending from the roadside were a vibrant green for nearly as far as the eye could see.
Grass, it seemed, would no longer be the subject of concern for the dragoons. Clearly, the
southern plains had not suffered the effects of the drought that had plagued the country traversed
by the dragoons during the first two legs of their expedition.75

The command had progressed only a short distance when they discovered the road from
Santa Fe to be nearly as well traveled as the road to Oregon. After marching only a few miles,
the column came upon a large group of Missouri traders returning to their homes. The captain of
the trader caravan, a Mr. Baldwin, stated that the northern route had become the preferred route
for merchants traveling between the states and Santa Fe. Although it added considerable
distance to the trip, the northern route was thought to be superior by traders because there was
less risk of trouble from Indians and water was not as scarce as it was along the Cimarron Cutoff.
Days later, after several more caravans were encountered, Lieutenant Turner thought the opinion
of Mr. Baldwin validated: “The appearance of [the] caravan shows that the old or lower Santa Fe
route is somewhat abandoned.”76

On the second day out from Bent’s Fort, the dragoons also encountered a group of
“Mexican Indians.” They were, in reality, a mixed group of Apache and Kiowa warriors. Cooke
was impressed by their manner of dress and the elaborate style with which they decorated their
horses and equipment with generous usage of silver and steel ornaments. He also thought they
spoke a regal Spanish. The Indians boasted that they were a raiding party going after the Pawnee
for some undisclosed transgression. Their claims did not strike Cooke or the other dragoons as
odd since the Pawnee were perpetually at war with most of their neighbors. The Indians also stated that they had seen a large party of white men the previous morning a short distance to the east. The dragoons assumed it was Lieutenant Frémont’s party. The dragoons had hoped to meet up with the Pathfinder, but now it looked like the encounter was not meant to be.\(^7\)

As the command advanced, encounters with the trader caravans became as anticipated as had those with emigrants along the Oregon Road. Since these travelers had only recently left the states, they brought news of the world to the information starved dragoons. For example, traders with a caravan passed on August 2, told the dragoons of President Andrew Jackson’s death in June. When another caravan was encountered on August 8, the dragoons learned that the Texas legislature had approved the resolution for annexation. If her citizens also favored the resolution, Texas would enter the Union later in the year.\(^8\)

Encounters along the trail, however, were not limited to travelers or Indians. On August 7, the dragoons discovered a runaway slave who was attempting to find his freedom in New Mexico—where the institution was banned under the Mexican constitution. The slave, whose name was not recorded, stated that he had run away because his master, a Mr. Hickland of Missouri, was abusive. Rather than continuing to endure his master’s bad treatment, the man decided to brave all hazards and privations in order to find freedom. Unfortunately, the runaway did not find sympathetic rescuers among the dragoons. He was instructed, presumably by Colonel Kearny, to remain in the service of one of the officers until the command returned to the settlements. There he would be returned to his master. Fortunately for the slave, his temporary master did not keep a close eye on him, and during the night of August 8, he slipped away once more. In the morning when he was discovered missing, the dragoons presumed he had sought
refuge with a group of traders passed along the road the day before and had resumed his journey to Mexico and freedom.\textsuperscript{79}

The dragoons kept to the highlands above the Arkansas for the next several days. Moving with what Cooke described as “our wonted pertinacity of progression,” the dragoons maintained a rapid pace, averaging approximately twenty-two miles each day for the first week. In their journals, both Cooke and Turner recorded the landmarks used by the traders to gage their position on the trail. At the end of the first day’s march, for example, the expedition camped near Big Timers, a series of tree-covered islands in the Arkansas that were used by travelers seeking shelter from harsh weather—especially in the winter when the winds “sweep with a furious swing over these vast plains.” Cooke found this particular location especially interesting as it had been suggested to him as a possible refuge for his command in 1843, had he found it necessary to winter on the Santa Fe Trail in order to protect merchant traffic from additional parties of Texas privateers.\textsuperscript{80}

On August 4, the dragoons lost their guide. An express rider sent from Bent’s Fort found the column encamped along the Arkansas that evening and delivered a letter to Colonel Kearny from Lieutenant Frémont requesting the services of Fitzpatrick. As nearly every member of the expedition was a veteran traveler of the Santa Fe road, the colonel had no reason to deny the Pathfinder’s application. Eager to extend his time on the federal payroll, Fitzpatrick readily accepted Frémont’s call to duty.\textsuperscript{81}

On August 6, the dragoons passed Chouteau’s Island. It was a large, tree-covered island in the Arkansas River that was considered by many as once marking point where the Santa Fe Trail left the United States and entered Mexico. The site brought numerous memories into Cooke’s mind of the summer spent along the Santa Fe Trail sixteen years earlier. He recalled
how, as a member of the army’s first reconnaissance expedition along the trail, he had passed what seemed like an eternity in the vicinity of Chouteau’s Island awaiting the return of a merchant caravan from Santa Fe. With but a few books to read, he remembered that he had turned to writing to pass the days—lest he suffocate under the weight of the beef, pork, and beans he thought were forming a coat around his brain. He also remembered that his first battles against with Indians had taken place in the area. Five hundred mounted and fiercely painted Comanche warriors had attack the camp, and he had led a squad of thirty enlisted men against their repeated charges. But that had been a long time ago, and now, Cooke hoped that if the expedition encountered the Comanche once more it would be as friends in council. He was curious about these Indians and wanted to know them better. He would be disappointed. No Comanches would be seen on this expedition.\textsuperscript{82}

That evening, the dragoons encamped at Pawnee Fort. Lieutenant Turner noted that the location was thought to be a former wintering ground used by the Pawnee. Still, he could not help but think its name was misleading since he could find nothing in the area “resembling the remains of a fort.” There were numerous cottonwood stumps in the area, but that merely demonstrated the tribe used to site to subsist their herds while wintering in the vicinity. Turner also noted that once the dragoons passed Chouteau’s Island, large herds of buffalo were seen roaming the plains south of the Arkansas River. Although great pains were taken to keep the command on the left bank of the river, in U.S. territory, hunting parties were regularly sent across the border to secure supplies of fresh meat. As had been the case when the herds were first encountered along the Oregon Trail, the dragoons viewed their reentry into buffalo country with mixed feelings. On the one hand, the dragoons looked forward to enjoying fresh meat with their meals. On the other, it became harder to find grass for the expedition’s livestock.\textsuperscript{83}
On the morning of August 9, after advancing the column four short miles down the Arkansas valley, Colonel Kearny ordered the command to halt. Across the Arkansas stood the grove of trees Cooke named after President Andrew Jackson in 1843. It was the location where he had disarmed the Texas privateers under the command of Colonel Jacob Snively. At the request of Cooke, or perhaps to satisfy his own curiosity, Kearny ordered the topographical officer attached to the expedition to formally survey the grove’s location so that it could be ascertained once and for all whether or not the “Snively Affair” had taken place on U.S. soil. After carefully executing his duties, the topographical officer, Lieutenant W.B. Franklin, announced that Jackson’s Grove stood twenty-five miles east of the 100th meridian—well within U.S. territory. Although Cooke did not record the incident in his journal, the announcement of Franklin no doubt came as a relief. Although the Snively Affair had never truly constituted a threat to his career, Cooke was well aware that, in a different political climate, the outcome of the investigation into the encounter with the Texans could have ended disastrously for him.84

The command passed Pawnee Rock on August 12. Considered to be the midpoint on the Santa Fe Trail between Bent’s Fort and Independence, Missouri, the dragoons sensed they were nearing home. For most members of the expedition the sites seen along the trail were familiar, almost commonplace, due to their experiences escorting Santa Fe traders to the Mexican border over the previous few years, and the journal entries of Cooke and Turner began to reflect their growing fatigue with their mission. Cooke nearly stopped writing altogether, and Turner, whose duties required daily entries in the expedition’s journal, began noting only the briefest of details: weather conditions, locations of campsites, stream crossed, and the number of merchants encountered.85
Turner also noted that weather conditions forced the commanding officer to alter the expedition’s order of march. Although his journal entries failed to record the actual temperatures, the lieutenant noted that since leaving Bent’s Fort the days had become excessively hot. Rather than risk the health of the expedition’s horses, the colonel instituted a new directive. Once sufficient water and grass were found along the trail, the command would rest throughout the heat of the day. The column would wait for the cooler temperatures of evening before finishing the day’s march. Still, in spite of the colonel’s new directive, horse were giving out throughout the command, becoming “so much reduced as not to be able to keep up with the column at the ordinary pace.” Each day a detail had to be organized to keep the weakened animals herded together and drive them behind the column at a slow and easy pace until reaching that evening’s camp.86

When the column departed Council Grove on August 19, Kearny released A Company from the expedition. They would be spared the journey to Fort Leavenworth and permitted to take the direct road to Fort Scott. The balance of the expedition continued on through the familiar landscape of modern southeast Kansas. Two days later, on August 21, one of the colonel’s horses suddenly died of an unknown illness that appeared to be affecting several other horses within the command. The only symptom the illness presented was swelling in the breast. A trader encountered told the dragoons that he had lost several horses in the area from similar symptoms. The colonel’s horse was not the only one to die. A “public horse” died of exhaustion the day before and another died that day, also from exhaustion. In total, nine horses were lost during the expedition. These were the last three.87

The dragoons encamped at Elm Grove on August 22. By this date, Kearny, like his men, was anxious to return home and he was eager to find a shorter route to Fort Leavenworth. Rather
than continue on to the point where the trail intersected the river, the colonel hoped to find a crossing point to the north that would permit the dragoons to arrive at Fort Leavenworth sooner than the usual course. Sending the regiment’s sergeant major in advance to scout the river for a proper crossing before dawn, the colonel ordered the column to turn due north from the Santa Fe Trail on August 23. Near midday, the sergeant returned and informed his colonel that there was a ferry operation near a Shawnee village along the banks of the Kanzas that could accommodate the command and place the dragoons on the opposite bank of the river within a day’s march of the fort. A resident of the village assured the sergeant that the fort was only eighteen miles beyond, and if hired as a guide, the villager would show the dragoons their way home. 88

Unlike so many of the previous days, the weather was quite cool. In fact, Cooke noted that there had been a frost on the ground that morning when the march began. By midday, after a grueling eighteen miles, the excessive heat had returned. As the command was so close to home, however, the colonel did not feel the need to delay beyond the time needed to rest and water his stock and feed his soldiers. Soon, several miles in advance, the dragoons clearly saw Pilot’s Knob—a landmark as familiar to soldiers posted at Fort Leavenworth as the sound of their own names. When the dragoons found their way onto the military road leading to the post, they were only ten miles away. Briefly, the familiar site of the byway enlivened the animals and they once again began to prance and quicken their pace. But rather than risk killing his clearly fatigued stock, the colonel gave the command to dismount. On the column trudged. Cooke recorded the exhausting toll of the march: “We walked an hour, the perspiration raining from my brow, and my brain throbbing; we walked right through streams, dashing water to the face with our hand. Still on: the endless last mile…” 89
As the sun disappeared on August 24, the weary dragoons entered the parade field from which they had left ninety-nine days, and 2,066 miles, earlier. Cooke noted that on that day back in May, they had stood crowded on the post’s parade field atop proud and prancing horses. Now, their lines were filled with gaps made by those who had left the command prior to their departure from the Laramie River. Before dismissing the command, Kearny read a commendation he had prepared, but Cooke did not hear a word uttered from his commanding officer’s lips. Worn out from the day’s march, he stood there in a daze, anxious only to hear the word “dismissed,” so that he could go to the waiting arms of his wife and children.90

By September 15, Colonel Kearny completed his report on the expedition for the adjutant general. The expedition, he declared, had been a total success. He and his dragoons had traversed the frontier, crossed the continental divide into the Oregon Country, ventured to the Mexican border, and returned to their home garrison with no significant losses. They had parleyed with several of the region’s tribes, establishing what Kearny hoped would be friendly relations while promising retribution if that friendship was rejected. The dragoons also had protected over two thousand overland travelers on the two great frontier thoroughfares. Most significantly, however, Kearny and his expedition troops had demonstrated to the international community that the United States could defend its far-flung territorial interests if necessary.

Still, in spite of the successes claimed by the dragoon commander, it was not readily apparent that the expedition had the impact described by the colonel in his report. For example, Kearny reported that while he had not met with as many of the region’s tribes as he had hoped, he entertained no doubts that every man, woman, and child, in every village in Indian country knew that the dragoons had passed through the region. They knew of the fine horses rode by the dragoons and their devastating arsenal of weapons. The dragoon commander was so confident
that the Indians had been sufficiently intimidated that he declared that it would not be necessary to build military posts along the Oregon Road to protect the emigrants, the army needed only repeat the expedition every few years to keep the Indians in check. In the colonel’s estimation, such a practice would keep the Indians “perfectly quiet, reminding them of . . . the facility and rapidity with which our Dragoons can march thru any part of their Country, & that there is no Place where they can go but the Dragoons can follow, & as we are better mounted than they are—overtake them.”

Yet, historians debate the impact of the appearance of the dragoons had on the tribes of the region. True, it would be nearly a decade before significant hostilities erupted between emigrants and Indians on the Oregon Road, but there is little evidence to support arguments that the appearance of the dragoons curbed the activities that infuriated so many back East. The Indians continued to demand tribute, steal livestock, and pilfer unguarded wagons. They also, unfortunately, continued to fall victim to the ill-effects of trader’s whiskey. In fact, whereas Kearny believed the Indians were thoroughly intimidated by the arrival of the dragoons on the Great Plains, some historians argue the Indians actually left their first encounters with the dragoons believing it was the military that feared them. Catherine Price, for example, argues: “Kearny later blustered that the sight of his well-armed dragoons had left an indelible impression on the Indian people he encountered and to whom he gave gifts, but to the Lakotas of the Platte River valley the colonel’s offerings seemed to indicate the high esteem in which the soldiers held them.”

It is equally difficult to determine the impact of the expedition on the ultimate outcome of the Oregon Question. Although the expedition certainly demonstrated that the United States could send troops across the frontier, it is difficult to imagine the appearance of a mere five
dragon companies would have convinced the most powerful empire on Earth to compromise its position on Oregon. Still, the Expedition of 1845 undoubtedly influenced the situation. In many respects, the chroniclers of the expedition, especially Cooke and Carleton, contributed to the popular sentiment that the road to Oregon was an easily traveled byway across the continent. Cooke published an abbreviated, but colorful account of the expedition in *Niles’ National Register* on October 25, 1845, as part of the newspaper’s “Sketches of the Great West” series. In his account of the journey, Cooke painted vivid images of the frontier’s beauty while muting the hardships recorded in his personal journal. Carleton published his account of the expedition as well. From November 9, 1845 through April 12, 1846, *The Spirit of the Times* published the lieutenant’s journal in its entirety. Unlike Cooke’s essay, Carleton did not omit the unpleasant aspects of the journey. Still, Carleton’s narrative describes an adventure that was so grand and romantic that the difficulties encountered during the march only added to the heroic quality of his tale. Given that the reports were also printed in the Bangor, Maine *Daily Courier* and the *Western Democrat* of Weston, Missouri, Carleton’s influence over would-be overlanders was undoubtedly greater than Cooke’s.

The popularization of the Oregon Road, however, held the key to the ultimate solution of the Oregon Question. As word spread of the ease with which the road could be traveled all the way to the Willamette Valley, more and more emigrants accepted the challenge of settling in Oregon—much as their forbearers had accepted the challenge of settling in Kentucky in the previous century. When the emigrant trains that shared the road with Cooke reached the Willamette Valley in 1845, they brought the total number of Americans living in Oregon to over five thousand. By the end of the 1846 emigration season, that number would climb to over six thousand. Given that there were only 750 English subjects in Oregon, the writing was clearly on
the wall: Oregon would become an American possession through sheer weight of numbers.

Thus, after much internal debate, Britain agreed to settle the Oregon Question on June 6, 1846. It offered the United States a treaty that would accept an extension of the 49th parallel as the boundary between United States and Canada. Although some outspoken members of the senate demanded the Polk administration adhere to its campaign pledge to drive Britain entirely out of Oregon, the treaty was ratified four days later on June 10, 1846.

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1 Stephen Watts Kearny to Adjutant General of the Army, March 18, 1845. RG393, Letters to the Adjutant General. Letters Received, 1845. Roll 300. M567.
6 Carleton, *Prairie Logbooks*, 158.
8 Turner, Expedition Journal, 1.
19 Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*,290-91
20 Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 291-92, Carleton, *Prairie Logbooks*, 201-02, and Turner, Expedition Journal, 11-14. Lieutenant Franklin from the Topographical Engineers found the expedition on May 29. He had arrived at Fort Leavenworth days earlier, and by “taking a much shorter route” than marched by the dragoons, found the expedition column before it crossed in to the Platte Valley. Unfortunately, his surveying equipment did not arrive with him, and Kearny ordered him to remain behind until it did. He joined the command a week later.
24 Carleton, *Prairie Logbooks*,
26 Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 299-302, Carleton, *Prairie Logbooks*,215-16, and Turner, Expedition Journal, 18-19. Turner noted that the members of the expedition were extremely disappointed with the taste of these buffalo. Cooke noted that the buffalo were “not yet fat.”


49. Carleton, *Prairie Logbooks*, 223-25, and Turner, *Journal Expedition*, 20-21. In his journal, Cooke noted that as the column crossed the South Platte, he found a comfortable spot on one of the islands in the stream and took a nap. When he awoke, the command was nowhere to be seen. A little frightened at the prospect of being left behind, he mounted his horse and raced to catch up with the column. See Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 304-08.


52. Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 310-12, and Turner, *Expedition Journal*, 22. Given that these men likely sat in close proximity to each other while recording their diary entries, it is interesting that Carleton wrote that Courthouse Rock actually looked like the nation’s Capital Building. Later, when he described Scott’s Bluff, he made comparisons to well-known castles in Europe, like the Alhambra in Grenada and the Castle of Heidelberg. See Carleton, *Prairie Logbooks*, 234-37.


59. Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 331-32. Cooke was not alone in his assessment. Lieutenant Turner claimed that the lack of vegetation in the area of their march forced the dragoons to extend their march beyond the distance planned for the day. Although Turner did not state what the planned distance of the march was, he recorded the column trekked 24 miles on June 13. See Turner, *Expedition Journal*, 26-27.


65. Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 338, Carleton, 246-50, and Turner, *Expedition Journal*, 28-31. Of the three sources, Cooke’s account of the council is the weakest. Carleton and Turner give nearly verbatim transcripts of Kearny’s address as well as the response of Bull’s Tail, the principle chief of the Brulé Lakota. George Hyde notes that the council presented an unique view into the Lakota political structure. The council was held in land claimed by the Oglala Lakota, yet it was a Brulé chief who spoke for all the Lakota gathered that day. Observed Hyde, “One suspects that the Brulés, who down to 1825 seem to have been considered the true Tetons, being usually called Tetons and not Brulês, were regarded by the Oglala as the elder, perhaps the parent group. There are many little clues pointing in this direction, but actual proof is wanting.” See George E. Hyde, *Red Cloud’s Folk* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937), 58.


Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 368, and Turner, *Expedition Journal*, 49. While Carleton’s journal continues with commentaries on the emigrants and Indians, his narrative of the expedition essentially ends once the dragoons reach the South Pass. It is, at present, unclear to this author whether or not Carleton actually went with the column all the way to the South Pass. Since none of the expedition journalists records which company remained on the Sweet Water to guard the lame stock while the balance of the command went to the South Pass, it seems possible that Carleton did not make the last leg of the outbound march. Once more, it also seems likely, that Carleton was among the dragoons sent back to Fort Leavenworth via the Oregon Trail once the expedition began its march to Bent’s Fort.


LeRoy R. Hafen and Francis Marion Young, *Fort Laramie and the Pageant of the West*, 73-77 and 86. Also see Remi Nadeau, *Fort Laramie and the Sioux Indians* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 32-41. Kearny believed the use of alcohol by traders to “grease the wheels of trade” was not only criminal, but immoral. In his report to the adjutant general, he advocated imposing martial law over Indian country to stop the importation of liquor by fur traders. See Kearny to Brigadier General R. Jones, September 15, 1845. RG393, Letters to the Adjutant General. Letters Received, 1845. Roll 300. M567.

Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 395-99, and Turner, *Expedition Journal*, 58-60. On July 17, Turner noted in the expedition’s journal that another council was held with a second group of Cheyenne Indians. The lieutenant suspected they were more interested in obtaining a few of the presents carried in the expedition’s wagons than actually hearing Kearny’s message. It mattered little because Kearny did not distribute presents at the conclusion of their gathering. The colonel, claimed Turner, it was “proper to make presents to a few individuals.” See Turner, *Expedition Journal*, 61.

Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 399-400.


Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 403-04 and 405-08.


Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 414. On July 18, Cooke recorded that the command had enough flour to last twelve days. He did not give an actual count on the number of cattle remaining in the dragoon’s beef herd. Also see Turner, *Expedition Journal*, 65-68.


Turner stated that the trader who passed along the news of Jackson’s death left Independence, Missouri, on July 1. The party of traders that informed the dragoons about the passage of the Annexation Resolution left Independence on July 16. See Turner, Expedition Journal, 74 and 79.

Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 419.

Turner, Expedition Journal, 75-76.


Turner, Expedition Journal, 76-77.

Turner, Expedition Journal, 79-80. Interestingly, Cooke did not record this event.

Turner, Expedition Journal, 80-81. As an example, Cooke made not diary entries from August 4 until August 13. On the latter day, he began to summarize the column’s march from Pawnee Rock. His next entry was dated August 24. See Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 421-30.

Turner, Expedition Journal, 82-85.

Turner, Expedition Journal, 85.

Turner, Expedition Journal, 85-86.


Turner to Adjutant General, September 15, 1845.


Chapter Six

“In this field of war’s drudgery”: Philip St. George Cooke in the Mexican War

By early 1846, Cooke believed war with Mexico was inevitable. After severing diplomatic relations in early 1845, the relationship between the United States and Mexico had deteriorated slowly but steadily—especially after the Polk Administration revealed its continental aspirations. President Polk did not simply wish to annex Texas, he wanted to acquire New Mexico and California as well. The president hoped to persuade Mexico to sell the territories, but all attempts at negotiation were rebuffed, and by the end of the year, the situation seemed grim. Within weeks of annexing Texas, the president issued orders to Brigadier General Zachary Taylor to move his army to the Rio Grande. To many the orders seemed a thinly veiled attempt to provoke hostilities.

Since 1836, Mexico had not only denied Texas independence, it had refused to recognize the border Texas claimed following its victory at the Battle of San Jacinto; namely, all territory north and east of the Rio Grande. As a state of Mexico, the border between Texas and Tamaulipas had extended along the Nueces River, which flowed from the hill country of central Texas into the Gulf of Mexico at Corpus Christi Bay—where Taylor’s army had assembled the previous July. When the United States annexed Texas, however, it brought the former Lone Star Republic into the Union with the borders it claimed as a sovereign nation. Thus, seen through Mexican eyes the directive sending Taylor and his army of nearly four thousand soldiers to the Rio Grande constituted an invasion of Mexican soil.

These developments suited Cooke fine. He wanted war, and in fact, yearned for news of its declaration. War meant opportunities to win glory and promotion through deeds of valor on
distant battlefields. Furthermore, war with Mexico would be a real war—not the pitiful slaughter of over matched, under supplied, and poorly armed Indians as he had experienced thirteen years earlier during the Black Hawk campaign. It would be a war like the ones he had studied as a child, a cadet at West Point, and as a professional soldier. So sure, in fact, was Cooke of the war’s eventuality, he requested six months leave to return east to visit family and friends while he could. Yet, he left no doubts as to his willingness to secure his country its western empire: “I wish it distinctly understood that, if war occurs, I have not the remotest idea of failing to be at the head of my squadron.”

Thus when Cooke received orders cutting his furlough short, he gladly returned to duty. On May 12, the day before President Polk declared war, Cooke rode into Fort Crawford, Wisconsin, where K Company had been transferred during his absence. Expectantly Cooke settled in at the post and awaited the arrival of new orders. Unfortunately, the war that he had so eagerly anticipated marked the opening of one of the most trying periods of his career. Not only would he be denied opportunities to gain distinction on the battlefields of Mexico, he would be relegated to duties that, in his opinion, would cast a shadow upon his reputation and abilities as a soldier. As he later stated, “That a soldier should pass through a war without distinction I used to think…is to be set down to his fault or want of merit.” Yet, in spite of the absence of battlefield glories on his service record during the Mexican War, Cooke’s dedication to his duty and profession allowed him to play a significant role in the war that ultimately gained his nation its western empire.

The first weeks of the war, however, passed agonizingly slow for Cooke. The orders sending him to the seat of the conflict did not arrive. Like so many career officers, Cooke was anxious to get into combat because he believed the war with Mexico would be his one great
opportunity to fight in a conventional, European-style conflict. After all, it had been over three decades since the United States had been engaged in such a war, and in Cooke’s mind, the present struggle with Mexico would likely be his only opportunity to engage in such a conflict. As a consequence, his level of anxiety increased as the weeks passed. His company had been sent to Fort Crawford to guard against a rumored Indian uprising, and he worried that their present mission might keep them in Wisconsin for the duration of the war with Mexico. He remained troubled by the possibility that he might miss the war waiting to put down a conflict that might never start.

His concerns were unwarranted. In June, the War Department issued orders for Cooke to take his company to San Antonio, Texas, where they were likely to join Taylor’s army as it pushed deeper into Mexico. When Cooke reached St. Louis, however, he discovered new orders awaiting him. On May 31, Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, freshly minted as the commanding officer of the Army of the West, wrote General G. M. Brooke, commander of the Department of the West, demanding that Cooke, Captain Edward V. Sumner, and their respective companies be attached to the Army of the West. Ordered to capture New Mexico, Kearny believed the addition of these two veteran officers and their companies were critical to his mission. In spite of the fact that he commanded nearly 1,600 regular and volunteer troops, and would be reinforced later by another volunteer regiment commanded by Colonel Sterling Price, Kearny did not wish to attempt the conquest without his two most senior captains.¹ Unaware of the directives sending Cooke and Sumner to Texas, Kearny wrote: “These comps are among the best in my Regt and should not be allowed to remain inactive during the present movements, when their services are so much required in the field.”³ Brooke agreed. The Adjutant General did as
well, and on June 6, he issued the orders transferring Cooke, Sumner, and their companies to the Army of the West.

The new orders were a crushing blow to Cooke. He knew that Kearny’s mission to New Mexico would succeed with or without his services. As he stated years later, he was “inexpressibly disappointed.” Over the years, through innumerable conversations with Santa Fe traders, Cooke had long since concluded that New Mexico and its inhabitants desired annexation by the United States, or at the very least, were anxious to be free of Mexican rule. He doubted that Kearny’s army would be opposed when it entered New Mexico. In fact, he thought its citizens would welcome the Americans. Cooke knew there would likely be no opportunities to engage in the sort of warfare that he hoped to experience when he left Fort Crawford. Still worse for Cooke was the realization that, while the mission to New Mexico would be successful, he would be little remembered for his role in the acquisition. In a memoir published decades later, Cooke reflected: “Working in this obscurity, our most faithful, venturous, long-continued labors, amid all privations and exposures, fruitful though they prove to be in the annexation of imperial extents of territory… shall be ignorantly accepted—placed in the appendix, as it were, of history.” War heroes were created on battlefields, not in quiet Mexican pueblos that welcomed their liberators.

In spite of their grave disappointments, Cooke and Sumner boarded their companies on a steamboat at St. Louis and began their journey to Fort Leavenworth. As Kearny had moved his force for Santa Fe before the end of June, Cooke and Sumner wasted little time at their home garrison. On July 6, after securing the necessary supplies, the veteran officers led their small column onto the well-worn military road outside Fort Leavenworth toward the Santa Fe Trail. For Cooke, still despondent over his new assignment, the journey lacked the romance it had held
for him in previous years. Whereas hunting, fishing, and the other charms of outdoor living once
colored the rugged nature of traveling across the frontier, Cooke found little to appeal to his
sense of adventure. The trek was, he wrote, “dull.”6 Frequent thundershowers and swarms of
biting insects constituted the major highlights of the march.

By month’s end, the two dragoon captains caught up with Kearny’s force and led their
small column went into camp nine miles outside Bent’s Fort. It was a chaotic, but familiar scene
to Cooke. Spread across the Arkansas River valley, the white tents of the Army of the West
were arranged by companies in neat, uniformed rectangles. Thousands of horses and mules
grazed under the watchful eyes of sentries, while mounted orderlies dashed about delivering
messages. All was, as Cooke noted, “life and stir of preparation” for the invasion.

As Cooke settled into camp and waited for the order, he received a summons from
Colonel Kearny near midday on August 1. During the ensuing council, Cooke learned of the
high regard with which his commanding officer held him. Kearny explained that on July 26, the
day he arrived at Bent’s Fort, he received a surprise visitor claiming to have been sent by the
president. The visitor bore a letter of introduction from Secretary of War William L. Marcy.7
The man was James Wiley Magoffin. An established merchant of the Santa Fe trade, with
business connection throughout northern Mexico, Magoffin had been sent by the president to
assist with the conquest. Officially, Magoffin was to use his business connections to procure
supplies for the Army of the West once it entered New Mexico. Unofficially, however, the
president entrusted Magoffin with a secret mission that would allow Kearny to take New Mexico
without firing a shot. A rumor, started years later by Senator Thomas Hart Benton, asserted that
the president had authorized Magoffin to furnish a bribe of $50,000 to Governor Manuel Armijo
to secure the peaceful surrender of New Mexico. In any case, Kearny had held his army, and
Magoffin, at Bent’s trading post to await Cooke’s arrival. Given the critical nature of Magoffin’s mission, Kearny would not permit the merchant to proceed on to Santa Fe unescorted, and Cooke was the only officer whom the colonel would entrust with Magoffin’s safety.⁸

On the following morning, after selecting a detail of twelve dragoons to serve as escorts, Cooke rode to Bent’s Fort to secure a mule to carry his personal supplies and equipment to Santa Fe. Accompanying him during his ride was Colonel Kearny. As the two officers rode, Kearny revealed why it was imperative that Cooke’s mission succeed. Following the capture of New Mexico, Kearny was under orders from the War Department to cross the desert and take California. To preserve his army and accomplish both phases of his mission, Kearny needed to take his first objective as quickly as possible with as little bloodshed as possible. The news, at least for the moment, renewed Cooke’s hopes that he might yet find battle before the war ended. “New deserts to conquer!” he declared. “That was giving to our monotonous toils a grandeur of scale that tinctured them with adventure and excitement.”⁹

Enlivened by Kearny’s announcement, Cooke entered the hectic confines of Bent’s Fort with a new sense of purpose. The scene that greeted him inside the main gate no doubt flashed memories of his inspection of Fort Laramie a year earlier. As he went about selecting his mule, he observed that the main courtyard of the fort was a confused mass of soldiers, Indians, traders, and curious onlookers. “Here were many races and colors,—a confusion of tongues, of rank and condition, and of cross purposes.” Amidst this bewildering scene, Cooke also met Magoffin, or “Don Santiago,” as he was known to his Mexican associates. In hopes of starting out their association on a pleasant note, Magoffin offered to share a “stirrup cup” of alcoholic punch with Cooke if a “private nook” could be found. It was an offer too rare and tantalizing to refuse.
Magoffin had secured a generous amount of ice from the fort’s ice house to cool a pitcher filled with the concoction and Cooke heartily accepted the invitation. Once a room had been found and the party of thirsty conspirators quickly made their way into the redoubt built over the fort’s main gate. In spite of their secretiveness, as the men made their way across the compound to the stairway leading to their hideaway, they were joined by an unwanted guest, “a long necked straggler—genus Pike,” that ignored the cold stares presented him by Magoffin, Cooke, and the others. But once sequestered inside, the dew covered pitcher filled with chilled punch softened their spirits and all indulged joyfully until the pitcher was empty.

With their thirsts quenched, the party assembled in the courtyard of the trading post to make ready for their departure. Unfortunately for the dragoon captain, his recently acquired mule was not yet inclined to join the expedition. When Cooke tugged on the animal’s lead-line, it reacted violently, dashing across the courtyard, bucking wildly, and scattered the captain’s mess kit and personal supplies in the process. As the mule kicked and whirled about the grounds, hapless spectators dove for cover, until two of Magoffin’s employees rushed forward with their lassoes, and within moments, restored calm. Perhaps it was due to the generous supply of punch furnished by Magoffin, but Cooke found the incident more entertaining than annoying. Once his packs were restored, he and the others exited the trading post with spirits high.

With Magoffin and his employees in the lead, the small escort party soon fell in with the Army of the West as it lumbered across the Arkansas River toward New Mexico. Cooke hoped his party would quickly outdistance the main body of troops, but after several hours of travel, he realized any efforts to overtake Kearny’s force would be futile. It would take nearly three days to finally pass the lead elements of Kearny’s army. Still, in spite of the heat and the dust kicked
up on the trail, Cooke enjoyed the march. He found the actions of Magoffin’s employees particularly entertaining. Señor José Gonzalez, a rotund and clumsy fellow, gave Cooke endless entertainment—especially when he attempted to stay atop the uncooperative mule he rode. But it was Magoffin whom Cooke delighted in most. The trader was always cheerful and his sense of humor kept the mood of the journey light-hearted. The nightly lectures the trader offered his Mexican employees on the virtues of American citizenship became greatly anticipated events. Fueled by a seemingly inexhaustible supply of spirits carried in Magoffin’s personal carriage, the lectures were filled with remarks that made it difficult for Cooke to restrain laughter.

Six days out from Bent’s Fort, Cooke and his companions crossed over the Raton Pass and entered New Mexico. The escort party was now the spearhead of the American invasion. Yet, as the small party traveled deeper into New Mexico, their conduct did not reflect the fact that they were members of a foreign army in “enemy” territory. As had become his habit, Cooke frequently broke from his companions to explore the road ahead—nominally, to select campsites. He continued to write entries in his journal describing the scenes he saw, the various plant and animal life, and the spectacular views afforded by the mountain’s elevation. “The view from the top of the mountain is very extensive … it embraces not only the Spanish Peaks, but Pike’s Peak, above one hundred miles to their north.” In fact, Cooke became so enchanted with the beauty of his surroundings that he ignored his “hunter’s instinct” and did not fire at two fawns that came to drink from the stream by which he was resting. “Lowlanders never see such pure blue skies …,” he observed, “…Here were varying and very perfect sensuous enjoyments.”

Yet, as Cooke and his companions traveled deeper into New Mexico, his enchantment with the territory’s rugged, natural beauty failed to extend to the inhabitants he encountered. On August 8, for example, the travelers passed the settlement of Mora, which consisted of a few
homes and scattered livestock. As the inhabitants were English and American—and not Hispanic—Cooke thought their settlement represented the initial push of “civilization” into the territory. Yet, his personal prejudices did not permit him to view the settlers as ideal representatives of their cultures. The settlers were “a very doubtful civilization … adulterated by wilderness habits and Indian intercourse.”

The next day Magoffin led Cooke and his escort of dragoons toward the town of Las Vegas, New Mexico, in the Gallinas Valley. The dragoon captain, however, did not immediately recognize the community from his position above the valley. In his journal he noted the appearance of several fields then under plow and an impressive brick-making operation complete with several kilns, but he could not glean the town itself. He was slightly embarrassed to learn that the network of bricks he saw piled around the chimneys was actually the town. Of course, as he and the other crested the bluffs overlooking the village, a scene was unfolding that might explain his mistake.

Outside the brickyard, villagers were driving their flocks in from their pastures, while others rushed their cows and mules into nearby corrals. It was, however, the collection of riders mounted on an assortment of mules and ponies racing toward the escort party that caught Cooke’s attention. From his position, it looked as if the inhabitants were about to attack, and it suddenly occurred to him that it would have been an ideal situation in which to display a flag of truce. Unfortunately, he had yet to prepare such a standard. Cautiously, he passed orders to his men to be prepared for any contingency.

Before the two groups came together, however, the villagers came to a quick stop in front of the startled party of soldiers with “Don Santiago.” Before queries could be made, one of the villagers revealed in a rapidly spoken stream of Spanish that they were forming a posse to chase
down a party of Indians that had killed two shepherds in a neighboring town. Although Cooke spoke some Spanish, it was Magoffin’s mastery of the language that eased the captain’s nerves by revealing the Americans were not the target of the aggravated villagers. Cooke was nonetheless, dismayed that the villagers would so hastily organize and depart their homes on what he considered to be a futile chase. The village where the attack had taken place was approximately twenty miles away. In his journal he noted that it seemed illogical to “gallop off in confusion, and without provisions, to a pursuit, in which, if the robbers were overtaken, it would be at the moment when their own horses were quite blown, or exhausted.” Mockingly, he described it as an example of “New Mexican efficiency.”

With the departure of the posse, Cooke followed Magoffin into the village to the home of the mayor, or alcalde, named Don Juan de Dios Maes. Through his years of trading, Magoffin and the alcalde had become friends, and soon, Cooke learned of the courtesies he could expect to receive as an acquaintance of “Don Santiago.” Excited villagers surrounded the visitors, and as Cooke expected, welcomed the American soldiers. As the men dismounted, Don Díos directed a number of servants—full-blooded Indians according to Cooke—to take the traveler’s horses out to pasture. Soon earthen cups of whiskey appeared, most likely filled with the infamous Taos Lightning, and were passed among the escort party. Entering the home of the alcalde, which Cooke described as being sparsely decorated with whitewashed walls of gypsum and an earth floor covered with primitive rugs, the visitors were treated to a modest meal of eggs, cheese, and tortillas. Cooke was then informed that an express rider would be sent from the village to make arrangements in each successive town to spread word of their arrival. He could expect a similar reception in each village until reaching Santa Fe, complete with a number of servants to stand
watch over his horses to ensure Indians did not steal them during the night. It was, according to the alcalde, a courtesy to ensure Cooke’s soldiers were able to sleep.\textsuperscript{13}

Cooke and his companions continued their leisurely journey through northern New Mexico for the next few days. As promised by the alcalde of Las Vegas, the small party was warmly received at each of the villages passed on their journey. On August 10, however, Cooke’s journey almost came to an unceremonious end. The night before Gonzalez caught a turtle and attempted to furnish his companions a sumptuous treat by making a pot of turtle soup. Unwittingly, in his preparation, Gonzalez either failed to properly clean the animal, used an ingredient that violently disagreed with Cooke’s constitution, or possibly used an ingredient to which the dragoon officer was allergic.\textsuperscript{14} Regardless of circumstances, Cooke was incapacitated for nearly two days. With only a small “lump” of opium to ease his pain, the dragoon officer was unable to leave the bed made for him in one of Magoffin’s wagons.

On August 11, the two parties parted. Considering the nature of their respective missions, Magoffin and Cooke determined that it would be best to arrive separately in the New Mexican capital. Magoffin, Gonzales, and his other employees continued on to Santa Fe, and left Cooke and his dragoons near Glorietta Pass to follow the next day. Although still suffering the ill effects of the turtle soup, Cooke recovered enough by August 12 to ride once more. Seeing the New Mexican countryside for the first time since the onset of his illness, he thought his surroundings had changed dramatically. The land no longer retained the fertile appearance that it had only a few days ago. Crossing from the Pecos River valley into that of the Rio Grande, Cooke saw for the first time the great city of commerce he had heard so much of through the years. The city rested on a barren, sandy flat in the valley floor. There was no grass, and beyond
the river, there were no trees. “Like a very extensive brick-yard indeed,” Santa Fe stood before him.

Cooke and his men entered the city via a long crooked street that led the dragoons past numerous crowds of curious onlookers. As he rode, Cooke extended polite greetings of “buenos días” to those closest to him. He was pleasantly surprised by the sincerity with which the citizens of Santa Fe returned his salutation. When well within the city, he stumbled across a barracks filled with Mexican soldiers, who surprised by the sudden appearance of the Americans, immediately turned out en masse, and began to frantically cry out their alarms. Their shouts were made with such “hideous intonation” Cooke mistook them for a menace. Realizing he had yet to display a flag of truce, he calmly drew his saber and tied a white handkerchief to its end. Then, “in a sentence of very formal book-Spanish,” announced the reason for his presence to the officer of the guard. Told to move up the street immediately to his right, Cooke led his dragoons toward the central plaza of the city, emerging immediately in front of the Palace of the Governors.

As Cooke’s detail entered the plaza, he directed his bugler to sound “parley.” Arrayed before him were several hundred Mexican soldiers—a mixture of regulars and conscripts that had been called out to meet Kearny’s advancing army. For several moments, he waited. Finally, the “Mayor de Plaza,” Captain Ortiz, approached to inquire of Cooke’s presence. Feeling somewhat awkward and irritated at his reception, Cooke briefly explained his purpose. Yet, his annoyance with the situation was increased when Ortiz abruptly turned upon his heels and returned to the Palace without offering Cooke any further explanation. Fortunately, Ortiz’s absence was brief, and he soon returned with the governor’s consent to escort Cooke into the Palace.
Cooke was led into a “large and lofty apartment,” where Governor Armijo sat behind an imposing wooden table, flanked by several military and civilian officers. The governor was immediately recognizable to Cooke. “There was no mistaking the governor, a large fine looking man, although his complexion was a shade or two darker than the dubious and varying Spanish,” Cooke thought. Also distinguishing was the fact that Armijo wore the uniform of a Mexican general: a blue frock coat, with a rolling collar and shoulder straps, blue striped trousers with gold lace, and a red sash. Speaking in his best Spanish once again, Cooke approached the governor and announced that he represented General Stephen Watts Kearny, commander of the American army then entering New Mexico. Cooke also explained that he possessed a letter from Kearny that he would be pleased to present at the governor’s convenience. The governor, then, informed Cooke that quarters had been prepared for him and his men, and that their horses would be taken under guard to be grazed outside of town. As it would have been a poor diplomatic showing to open formally the business that had brought the men together, the dragoon captain took his leave.

Ortiz walked Cooke to a modestly furnished apartment within the Palace. As the two advanced through the corridors, Ortiz explained where Cooke’s men were being quartered and that his liberty would be not restricted during his stay. To display his confidence in his hosts, Cooke sent word through his orderly to have the detachment’s horses delivered for grazing. Although initially informed that the apartment would be his alone during his stay, Cooke was soon joined by Magoffin’s employee Gonzales. Before Cooke could make his dissatisfaction with the arrangements known, a host of American merchants arrived to call upon the dragoon officer. Shortly thereafter a servant brought cake and Mexican chocolate for the men to indulge upon during their conversations. The woman also brought a generous amount of whiskey—
which Gonzales seemed to prefer to Cooke’s growing displeasure. The captain, however, did not long remain with his countrymen. After a brief period of conviviality, another messenger interrupted the gathering to conduct Cooke to his formal meeting with Armijo.¹⁶

Cooke delivered his credentials and sat quietly while they were read to the governor. Then he presented Armijo with the letter Kearny wrote seeking the peaceful surrender of New Mexico: “I come to this part of the United States with a strong military force [&] a yet stronger one is now following as a reinforcement to us. We have many more troops than sufficient to put down any opposition that you can possibly bring against us [&] I therefore for the sake of humanity call upon you to submit to fate.” The governor was clearly disturbed. Armijo seemed surprised to learn that Kearny’s army was already on the move and approaching Santa Fe. He became quite interested in learning Kearny’s actual rank, was he a colonel or a general?

Believing that Armijo would be more familiar with the Napoleonic model of military organization, where the general of an army commanded several divisions and not merely a reinforced regiment like the Army of the West, Cooke readily confirmed Kearny’s rank as a general.

Although Cooke could not be sure of Armijo’s considerations, he believed the governor was greatly disturbed by the impending arrival of the Army of the West—but not because of the possibilities of battle. As governor, Armijo had used his position to fleece the population and Cooke doubted very seriously that the governor entertained thoughts that the people of New Mexico would rush to his aid in order to preserve his rule over the territory. Furthermore, Armijo had “little or no military experience.” What disturbed Armijo most, thought Cooke, was the possibility that he might have to abandon Santa Fe before the fall caravans arrived from Missouri. For years the caravans had been the main source of Armijo’s personal fortune. Not
only had the governor invested substantially in several trading operations, he had used his position as governor to line his pockets with bribes paid by other merchants wishing to avoid the prohibitive custom duties prescribed by Mexican law. Cooke believed Armijo hoped to collect the “duties” from the fall caravan, which he expected any day, before abandoning the city. Little did Armijo know, but the fall caravan traveled in the wake of Kearny’s army.¹⁷

While Governor Armijo contemplated the possibilities that would coincide with the arrival of the Army of the West, Cooke took advantage of his host’s generosity and explored the city before he returned to his quarters in the Palace. Before the afternoon’s siesta, he wanted to discover the condition of the city’s defenses and its stores of ordnance. After returning to his room, however, he found no rest. First, a nervous member of his detail contrived entry into the Palace in order to warn Cooke of a plot he had uncovered by members of the Mexican garrison to massacre the Americans that night. The captain reassured the trooper, urging the man “that sobriety and prudence should not be lost sight of.”

Yet the greatest obstacle to Cooke’s contemplated siesta came from the man with whom he shared the apartment: Gonzales. Having become quite drunk earlier in the day, Gonzales had passed out prior to Cooke’s return. Unfortunately, as the trooper departed, Gonzales rose from his slumber and called on servants to bring food. “Presto,” plates and flatware appeared, followed by platters of mutton chops, chicken, chili, tortillas, sweets, tea, and whiskey. As Cooke was still not fully recovered, he declined the meal, accepting only a small piece of cake and a cup of tea. But Cooke’s patience with his roommate were at an end. The hoggish manner in which his drunken companion was eating disgusted the dragoon, and very shortly, Cooke felt compelled to do what he could to ensure Gonzales returned to unconsciousness as soon as possible. The sober captain refilled his tablemate’s bowl of whiskey as rapidly as the man could
empty it, and soon enough, the desired result was achieved. Gonzales, sated and very inebriated, stumbled from the table and fell into a pallet on the floor. Unfortunately, Cooke’s victory was fleeting. As Cooke settled on the bed for his siesta, Gonzales “saluted” the dragoon’s ears “with such horrid sounds that I fancied suffocation and explosion were contending for the mastery over his mountain of flesh.”

Around ten o’clock that evening, Governor Armijo knocked at Cooke’s door. He was accompanied by Magoffin and Colonel Diego Archuleta of the Mexican army. Since Cooke’s departure that afternoon, the governor had engaged in lengthy discussions with the two men over the fate of Santa Fe and New Mexico. Playing his role as a double agent masterfully, Magoffin convinced Armijo that the fate of Santa Fe and eastern New Mexico were sealed—it would be part of the United States. The governor had little recourse but to evacuate the town and lead his soldiers elsewhere. When Archuleta balked at this proposal, however, the merchant suggested that in Armijo’s absence, the colonel would be his likely successor. As such, Archuleta would be in position to negotiate the cession of western New Mexico. Magoffin assured the colonel that the United States would be extremely generous and grateful to such an individual. Of course, Magoffin was able to facilitate these arrangements “at the expense of a large bribe.”

After the men finished their negotiations, Armijo determined to send a commissioner with Cooke when he returned to Kearny. The man, Dr. Henry Connelly, would join the dragoons the next morning when they departed Santa Fe. Cooke consented and also agreed to take chocolate with the governor in the morning. It was settled, the United States would have its empire.

Cooke and his detail of dragoons rode out of Santa Fe on August 13. Although Governor Armijo and Colonel Archuleta had agreed—tentatively—to the peaceful transfer of New Mexico
to the United States, Cooke carefully inspected each pass and canyon he traversed over the next
two days. Apache Canyon, northeast of Santa Fe, would make an excellent location for an
ambush. Cooke would take no chances.

On August 15, Cooke met Kearny and the Army of the West outside Tecolote, New
Mexico. As the army passed, Cooke followed his commanding officer and staff into the tiny
pueblo and witnessed a scene that had been repeated in every town since Kearny entered the
territory. After a brief council with local officials, the general assembled the townspeople, and
through his translator, read his proclamation announcing the annexation of eastern New Mexico
by the United States. The people were freed from their allegiance to Mexico and were now
citizens of the United States. Then, he issued an oath of allegiance to the local alcalde and
confirmed his place in office. Initially Cooke gave the matter little thought. The entire episode
took less time to play out than it required to water the horses of the American delegation.
Ironically, in view of his earlier assertions that the people of New Mexico would welcome
Americans, he believed the people of the pueblo either resented the idea of swearing an oath to a
“foreign” government, or worse, were wholly disinterested. Years later, however, after much
reflection, the occasion assumed a much greater magnitude than it had originally. Unfortunately,
Cooke’s racism tainted the significance of the occasion: “The great boon of American citizenship
thus thrust, through an interpreter, … upon eighty thousand mongrels who cannot read,—who
are almost heathens—the great mass reared in real slavery, called peonism, but still imbued by
nature with enough patriotism to resent this outrage of being forced to swear an alien allegiance,
by an officer who had just passed the frontier. This people who have been taught more respect
for a corporal than a judge, must still have been astonished at this first lesson of liberty.”²¹
In a mere matter of moments, following the utterance of a few words and the issuance of an oath, Kearny made the first gestures necessary to complete the bloodless conquest of a foreign territory. If ever a military figure played the role of the benevolent conqueror, it was Stephen Watts Kearny. He did not install new leaders, with known loyalties to the United States, in the towns. He did not disrupt their cultural, political, or religious institutions. He did not requisition, or permit his troops to forage supplies from the village stores. Initially through his words, and eventually, through his actions, he demonstrated to the people of New Mexico that their institutions and their property would be more respected by their new national government as they had been under their former government. While Cooke’s negotiations ensured there would be no need to fight battles to conquer the territory, Kearny’s benevolence ensured the people would not revolt against their American captors.22

On August 18, as the Army of the West neared Apache Canyon, Cooke was placed in command of the advanced guard. Ordered to keep to the main road into Santa Fe, Cooke cautiously led his troops into the gap. Although Governor Armijo had pledged to lead his soldiers away from the territorial capital, reports received within the last few days stated that the governor had returned to the area and was planning to engage Kearny in or near Apache Canyon. Of course, during the previous evening, an unidentified “fat man” arrived at Kearny’s tent stating that the governor’s courage had abandoned him once again, and the canyon was undefended.23 Still, Cooke thought it best to reconnoiter the canyon before the main column arrived. What he found struck him as a half-hearted attempt on the part of the governor to feign willingness to battle against the invaders of his country. Atop a rocky gorge, Cooke discovered a few felled trees stacked as breastworks, but there was no indication that Armijo’s army remained in the area
to threaten the Army of the West. Armijo had clearly received reports that dramatically overstated the size and strength of Kearny’s army and he had fled.

After riding nearly twenty eight miles, Cooke’s squadron of dragoons halted outside Santa Fe and waited for Kearny’s army to arrive. Near dusk, following the arrival of the First Regiment of Missouri Volunteer Cavalry, Cooke led the first troops into the city. He led his troops to the main plaza, and before an assembly of townspeople, he raised the Stars and Stripes over the city for the first time. He then selected a guard of fifty dragoons and dismissed the remaining regulars and volunteers—directing them to establish their camp outside of town. The night, however, did not long remain calm. Volunteers soon made their way back into town to seek out saloons and taverns to quench their thirsts and fill their bellies. Although he generally despised the undisciplined conduct of volunteers, Cooke was not one to deny men a well-earned drink or meal. Yet, once the soldiers became too boisterous in their celebrations, the veteran dragoon officer quickly gathered his guardsmen and cleared the town of the Missourians.

Shortly after midnight, weary from his duties, Cooke once again found his way to the Palace of the Governors. By then, General Kearny and his suite had also entered the city and had found their accommodations in the Palace as well. Unlike the experience of his previous visit, Cooke would not enjoy the comfort of a fine soft bed. Instead, he carried his saddle into the main hall, and using it for a pillow, lay down on the dirt floor and slept “soundly.”

On the following morning, the business of securing New Mexico for the United States began in earnest. Delegations from nearby towns and villages, as well as several Indian pueblos, arrived to discuss matters with Kearny and swear their respective oaths to the United States. Then near midday, the general formally took possession of all of New Mexico for the United States. Before a gathering of citizens in the plaza, Kearny climbed to the roof of the Palace of
the Governors with several New Mexican political officials. Notable among their numbers was
the lieutenant governor, Juan B. Vigil. At the appointed hour, Kearny issued the oath of
allegiance to the assembled officials. Then Vigil stepped forward, and in Spanish, read Kearny’s
proclamation to the residents of Santa Fe. For the people gathered in the plaza, Kearny’s words
must have come as a shock. They were not going to be murdered by the American soldiers as
rumors had promised. Nor were the people of New Mexico going to be treated as enemies or
vassals of the United States. On the contrary, they were now citizens in good standing with their
new government. Moreover, Kearny pledged that their new government would protect the
people of New Mexico from Navajo, Ute, and Apache warriors who seemed to prey upon the
territory without fear of reprisal. Yet, the biggest shock must have come from Kearny’s
announcement that soon he would provide “a free government . . . similar to those in the U
States.” Once formed, the people would “then be called on to exercize[sic] the rights of freemen
in electing their own Representatives to the Territorial Legislature!” Until that time, Kearny
would be the territorial governor.26

Cooke, meanwhile, seemed less concerned with the affairs of state than he did with
finding proper accommodations. He and three other officers moved, “temporarily,” into the
apartment used by Cooke during his initial visit to the city. It was a pleasant alternative to living
in a dusty tent outside town. Moreover, the apartment supplied other benefits. First, the former
Mayor de Plaza, Captain Ortiz, had resigned his military post and assumed a position as the
vendor of wines and aguardiente from El Paso. While Cooke failed to mention the amount of
business he and his companions gave the former-Mexican captain, it is highly unlikely that the
Americans did not contribute handsomely to Ortiz’s profit margin. Secondly, “a slave of the
house,” described as a young Ute woman who had been captured from the tribe at an early age,
served as a housekeeper for the officers during their stay. Each day, she cleaned the apartment and made their beds. Finally, quarters within the city also placed Cooke in proximity to the local market. It was, according to him, well supplied with “mutton of true mountain flavor,” peppers, onions, apples, and apricots. He also purchased coffee for fifty cents a pound, and bought sugar for forty cents a pound.²⁷

To Cooke, however, these prices seemed exorbitant. Although his personal finances insured that he would not have to forgo such indulgences as sweetened coffee, he was unsure of the ability of the enlisted soldier to pay market prices for these goods. His concerns stemmed from notice that rations for the troops were running low. The army had, he recorded, “marched from Bent’s Fort with only rations calculated to last, by uninterrupted and most rapid marches, until it should arrive at Santa Fe.” Unsure of when Colonel Sterling Price would arrive with reinforcements and additional supplies, Cooke questioned Kearny’s decision to treat the population as citizens and not enemy civilians. The general’s decision meant that “the invaders” were denied “the rights of war to seize needful supplies.” Making the situation worse was the fact that the army sent Kearny on his mission without the benefit of “a military chest.” In its wisdom, the War Department had not furnished Kearny with gold coin to make purchases. Of course, by month’s end, Cooke doubted that New Mexico could support the appetites of “its seventeen hundred conquerors,” regardless of whether or not the army requisitioned the supplies it needed or paid for them in gold. The men, he noted, were subsisting on “but nine ounces of ground wheat per day, and no sugar or coffee!”²⁸

Over the next couple of weeks, while Cooke remained in Santa Fe, he continued exploring the territorial capital and observing its inhabitants. For reasons never fully explained, his disdain for the Hispanic population of the territory grew. He seemed particularly offended by
their adherence to the Catholic faith. He viewed priests as “preeminent scoundrels,” who exercised the worst possible influences over their followers. He thought the Hispanic women of the territory were delicate and attractive, and superior to the men, but he also considered them morally inferior creatures. After attending a ball held at the governor’s palace thrown by General Kearny, Cooke observed: “nowhere else is chastity less valued or expected.” Yet most disturbing to him was the system of servitude that seemed so prevalent throughout the territory: peonage. Great landowners, Cooke observed, maintained a store on their property that “managed to keep the poor peons always in debt, and this legally binds them and their families to endless service and dependence” upon the landowner. The great tragedy of the system was that the indebted laborer and his family could be “cast off, without any provision in their old age.”

Although Cooke seemed confident that “such flagrant servitude” would eventually end, he remained unsure as to the future of the territory. “When shall such a people be capable of self-government!” In his opinion, New Mexico would remain a territory for at least thirty years, or until the territory’s population became sufficiently anglicized: “the language will not change faster than the color of the citizens.”

Yet, Cooke spoke glowingly of the territory’s Indian population. The “civilized or Pueblo” Indians were to him, “a remarkable element in the New Mexican population.” Cooke noted that they spoke Spanish, in addition to their native languages, and professed Catholicism as their faith, although they maintained “some cherished heathen customs and ceremonies.” Still, in spite of their adherence to traditional religious practices, Cooke noted that the Pueblos were reported to be “far more moral christians than the New Mexican proper.” He admired their architectural abilities. Their homes, constructed of adobe bricks, were several stories high unlike the typical Mexican dwelling. They were built without doors, each story being entered from its
roof by the use of a removable ladder. He was equally impressed with their agricultural accomplishments. They maintained “diligently cultivated grounds” that produced a wide array of fruits and vegetables. Cooke was particularly fond of the grapes grown at one of the nearby Pueblos. They were “as large as musket balls,” and “in no other part of the world . . . are there grapes so palatable.”

Even the dreaded Navajo found words of praise from Cooke. While recognizing they were a “warlike tribe,” he observed that the Navajo were wealthier than the mass of New Mexicans. They had “advanced [through a] few of the first steps of civilization, and therefore [were] very remarkable as manufactures.” The panchos the Navajo produced from the wool of their flocks were quite remarkable. Not only were they exceptionally handsome garments, “approaching the India shawl in beauty and costliness,” they were absolutely waterproof. Still, in spite of his admiration, Cooke realized that the Navajo would ultimately need to be conquered. Through sources unnamed, Cooke learned that for more than a decade, the Navajo had preyed upon the outlying rancheros, towns, and Indian pueblos, without much fear of retribution from Armijo’s government. In fact, it was alleged that the former governor put more effort into restraining his citizens from seeking retribution against the Navajo, than he did in preventing their raids: “it is charged that Armijo used them [the Navajo] as an effectual check to any resistance to his arbitrary oppressions.” So effective were Navajo raiders that some believed the territory’s sheep population had been reduced by nearly eighty percent since 1832. One man, Cooke recorded, assured him that he had lost 250,000 sheep to raiding Navajo warriors. As a result, the people lived in constant fear of an attack—“almost confined to their villages.”

Still, Cooke did not see a promising future for the new territory. “Except in narrow valleys and narrow strips, mostly wooded, reached by mountain showers, the whole province,
alluvion as well as table-land, is so arid as to seem uninhabitable.” Due to the need to irrigate fields, farming was restricted to the river valleys where mountain run-off ensured consistently flowing streams. The balance of the territory was sufficient for pastoral pursuits, but the need for water would also restrict livestock production. “Thus any considerable immigration cannot be expected,” recorded Cooke. In fact, he saw little advantage in his nation’s seizure of the territory, save for the possibility of offering “the convenience of a rounded boundary.” The territory, he thought, would not factor in the development of roads to California following the war. “These routes,” he wrote, “will be above or below” New Mexico.32

On August 31, Cooke led K Company out of Santa Fe to establish a grazing camp for his horses near Galisteo. In spite of repeated assurances that the rainy season had arrived in New Mexico, there was still no grass for the horses within fifteen miles of the capital. Since it went into occupation, the Army of the West, out of necessity, had been forced to dismount nearly all its cavalry troops and establish grazing camps throughout the Rio Grande valley—some as far as fifty miles away from the Santa Fe. If Cooke lamented the dietary plight of the enlisted men, he truly pitied that of the horses.

There was, unfortunately, no relief for the animals. Once Cooke arrived at Galisteo, he found no grass in the valley. It had been cropped nearly to the roots by passing merchant caravans and other southbound travelers. Desperate to find grass, he and K Company roamed the Rio Grande valley searching its tributaries for any stretch of land offering nourishment to their horses. Too often, though, the only available grass was on the tablelands above the valley’s streams, which meant that the horses passed the day without water. Adding to his growing discontent with New Mexico and its inhabitants, when grass was found near water, local landowners were unwilling to permit the dragoons to graze their animals. “We marched
yesterday toward Santa Fe in search of grass … making inquiries at the houses, the people evidently averse to our stopping, regarding us perhaps, in the light of a swarm of locusts.” Fortunately, as he combed the valley, Cooke learned that some of the smaller farmers were willing to sell their surplus corn, and he eagerly purchased as much of the commodity as he could. Each night, wagons loaded with cornstalks arrived at his camp, where his stock voraciously devoured the plants—roots, stalks, blades, and ears. Cooke noted that “there is not a particle of litter in the morning.” Still, in spite of his efforts, K Company’s horses showed few signs of recovery after three weeks. “Our horses have become poorer, notwithstanding all efforts to recruit them by all means available.”

While Cooke vainly searched for grass, the tasks of crafting a new territorial government and establishing a legal code were continued by Kearny and a select team. Since the general’s arrival in Santa Fe, he had endeavored to follow the Secretary of War’s instructions “to provide for them a free government with the least possible delay.” Colonel Alexander Doniphan and Private Willard P. Hall, both lawyers by profession, prepared a legal code for the territory based on the laws of Missouri and Texas. Their labors lasted until September 22, when Kearny published the “organic law for the territory of New Mexico, in the United States of America.” The document established the basis for a permanent civilian government in the territory and called for elections of territorial representatives, as well as a congressional delegate, on the first Monday of August, 1847. All “free male citizens of the territory” would be permitted to participate in the elections. Kearny also appointed several territorial officials to assume control of the civilian government until the elections were held. The general installed merchant Charles Bent as governor. He appointed the First Dragoon’s former commanding officer, Henry L.
Dodge, as the territorial treasurer. Kearny also filled the offices of secretary, marshal, U.S. district attorney, treasurer, auditor, and three judges of the superior court.lov

During this time, Kearny also began finalizing his plans for the invasion of California. In mid-September, Kearny wrote the adjutant general to inform him that the territory was perfectly quiet. Kearny thought “the inhabitants of the country were … highly satisfied [&] contented with the change of government,” and he did not expect any resistance to the American presence in the future. The people of New Mexico were so content, in fact, Kearny planned to begin his march before Colonel Price arrived. He planned to depart Santa Fe on September 25, and if all went well, he expected to arrive in California near the end of November. He would take with him the three hundred members of the First Dragoons. The balance of his command would remain in New Mexico until relieved by Price. The only other units that would make the trek to the west coast would be a battalion of Mormon volunteers under the command of Captain James Allen and an escort of eighty mounted volunteers. Kearny planned to lead his command approximately 200 miles down the Rio Grande valley, before turning west to seek out the Gila.

On September 26, Cooke rejoined Kearny and the other companies of the First Dragoons as they slowly made their way down the Rio Grande valley. His reunion was brief, however. On October 3, Kearny learned that Captain James Allen, commander of the Mormon Battalion, had died en route to New Mexico. The news immediately threw Kearny’s plans into disarray.

While the majority of the troops that served in the Army of the West were members of volunteer units, the Mormon Battalion was an exceptional addition to Kearny’s force. Recruited exclusively from members of the embattled Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormon Battalion represented a unique arrangement between the President of the United States and leaders of the church, namely Jesse Carter Little, president of the church’s eastern
operations, and Brigham Young, president of the church. Although created to serve as a combat/occupation force in California, both the Mormons and the president had ulterior motives for supporting the establishment of the battalion. In terms of military necessity, Polk realized the battalion was unnecessary. Furthermore, the Mormons, as a community, cared little for the continental aspirations of the United States. After enduring nearly a decade of uninterrupted political persecutions, mob violence, and the repeated expulsion of their communities in states across the Midwest, the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were concerned only with devising a plan that would allow their church and its abused followers to emigrate into the extremes of the western frontier where they could worship freely, in safety and security. For the Mormons, formation of the battalion was simply a means to an end.

In recent years, the Saints had suffered the assassination of the founder of their faith, a self-proclaimed prophet of God named Joseph Smith, and the violent expulsion of their people from communities in New York, Ohio, Missouri, and most recently, western Illinois. In the aftermath of Smith’s death, the church’s leadership, especially its new president Brigham Young, realized that if the church were to survive, it would be necessary to move away from the populated centers of the eastern United States. The only hope for the church and its membership was to relocate onto the far western frontier, among the isolated valleys of the Rocky Mountains, or perhaps along the Pacific Coast, in California or Oregon. The challenge faced by the new Mormon leader, however, was not where he would take his Saints, but rather, how to finance the immigration of thousands of destitute followers across the continent. Consequently, the Mormons looked to the formation of the battalion strictly as a means to finance the emigration of their people. As Young later observed, “If we want the privilege of going where we can worship God according to the dictates of our consciences, we must raise the battalion.”
The president’s decision was equally political. He wished to secure the loyalty of the Mormons at the outset of their western exodus. Polk realized that the addition of 500 Mormon volunteers would have little impact on the Army of the West’s success. His primary concern was to ensure the Saints did not interfere with the territorial acquisitions sought by the United States as spoils of war. In a letter from Little, Polk learned that the Mormon leadership hoped their emigrations could take place under “the outstretched wings of the American Eagle,” but they were in desperate need of money to finance the operation. While church leaders disdained the thought of turning to a foreign government for assistance, Little cautioned the president that they might be forced to accept the aid of a “foreign power” if the United States ignored the Mormons in their greatest hour of need.37

Little’s plea was a polite threat designed to play on the president’s anxiety over the still unsettled Oregon Question. In April, at the president’s request, Congress dissolved the Joint Occupation Treaty with Great Britain, and the possibility that the United States might find itself in yet another war with England still loomed on the horizon. The presence of as many as 15,000 Mormons willing to sell their allegiance could permanently shift the advantage in the contest for Oregon back to Great Britain. Moreover, if the Mormons gave their loyalty to Britain, they could threaten American designs on California by attempting to establish an independent nation on the West Coast. Although Little assured the president that the Mormons remained dedicated to the United States, Polk thought it best to appease the Saints. On June 3, 1846, the president authorized the enlistment of 500 Mormon volunteers, “with a view to conciliate them, attach them to our country & prevent them from taking part against us.”38

Given the turbulent history, Kearny, like most Americans, questioned the loyalty of the Mormons and unapologetically refused to turn command of the battalion over to one of their
volunteer officers. Furthermore, the politically sensitive circumstances surrounding the battalion required the general to appoint a competent officer from the regular army to succeed Allen. In light of the dangers that the battalion would undoubtedly encounter during its march, the general also recognized the critical need to appoint an officer with command experience and the campaign skills necessary to lead a band of volunteers across several hundred miles of unknown deserts. Without hesitation, Kearny called on Cooke.

The assignment was yet another disappointment. As he had done previously, Cooke reluctantly accepted the command. Although the new posting offered higher rank and pay, that of a volunteer lieutenant colonel, Cooke did not rejoice at his new assignment—by accepting command of the Mormon Battalion, he effectively resigned from the First Dragoons.39 In his journal, Cooke wrote few words to convey his disappointment: “And now, at night, I have been selected to succeed him [Captain Allen]; which, of course, must turn my face to Santa Fe tomorrow. That is turning a very sharp corner indeed; it is very military.” The next day, he and his bugler would start for Santa Fe. Two additional troopers would remain behind to guard Cooke’s possessions until he returned with his new command.40

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2 Although given an army to command, the force Kearny organized into the Army of the West was surprisingly small given the scope of his assignment: to conquer New Mexico, then encompassing the territory that would become Arizona, as well as southern Colorado, Utah, and Nevada, as well as California. According to several sources, Kearny’s Army of the West was composed of less than 1,600 soldiers—the overwhelming majority of them volunteers. In a letter to the Adjutant General, dated June 29, 1846, Kearny listed is army as follows: Three Companies First Dragoons (C, G, and I), Eight Companies Mounted Volunteers (First Missouri Mounted Volunteers), two companies light artillery, the Laclede Rangers of St. Louis, plus Cooke and Sumner’s dragoons. The total number set by Kearny was 1,528 soldiers. Ultimately, Kearny’s force would be augmented by the arrival of the Mormon Battalion and another force of mounted volunteers raised by Colonel Sterling Price; but these troops would not join Kearny until after he had “conquered” New Mexico. See Sachsen-Altenburg and Gabiger, *Winning the West*, 154.
3 As quoted in Young, *Cooke*, 174.
5 Cooke, *Conquest of New Mexico and California*, 69.
6 Cooke, *Conquest of New Mexico and California*, 5.
Lieutenant Emory Reports names in his narrative, it is possible that Cooke’s account remains consistent with the fact. See W.H. Emory, built. Emory makes no mention of Cooke already entering the city, but for miles. The lieutenant adds that once Kearny entered the city, the flag was raised over the plaza and saluted by thirteen pieces of artillery fired from heights where Fort Marcy was later built. The statement is merely the conclusion drawn by the author. No other member of the party seems to have suffered similarly as a result of eating the soup. It should be noted that Kearny’s commission as a brigadier general did not take effect until the Army of the West had actually entered New Mexico. In an 1849 letter to Magoffin, Cooke complemented Magoffin for not volunteering to serve as interpreter during the meeting with Armijo. By doing so, Cooke thought that Magoffin skillfully managed to avoid casting suspicions on his role in the plot. “I am strongly impressed with the skill you exhibited not to compromise your old influence over the Mexican General, by an appearance of your real connexion with myself (even furnishing an interpreter, rather than appear on the official occasion).” See, Cooke to Magoffin, February 21, 1849, in Stella M. Drumm, ed., Down the Santa Fe Trail and into New Mexico, 264.

Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 19-21. Also see Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 178-79.

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Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 34-35.

22 Of course, in December, a revolt began in New Mexico that lasted until February 1847. It should be noted, however, that the rebellion did not begin while Kearny administered the territory. When the rebellion began, Kearny was in California. Although the cause of the “Taos Rebellion” is still debated, much blame is placed on the conduct of the occupying forces in New Mexico under the command of Colonel Sterling Price. Cooke gives a brief, and biased, account of the rebellion in his memoir. See, Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 111-24.


Cooke’s narrative departs slightly from that of other sources regarding the taking of the city on August 18. For example, Lieutenant W. H. Emory writes that the city was not occupied until after the entire Army of the West stood before Santa Fe near dusk. Emory notes that Kearny wanted to make an impression on the citizens of the New Mexican capital, so throughout the day, repeated halts had been called to switch out teams pulling the artillery so that the army would not be stretched out for miles. The lieutenant adds that once Kearny entered the city, the flag was raised over the plaza and saluted by thirteen pieces of artillery fired from heights where Fort Marcy was later built. Emory makes no mention of Cooke already entering the city and raising the flag. Still, as Emory gives few names in his narrative, it is possible that Cooke’s account remains consistent with the fact. See W.H. Emory, Lieutenant Emory Reports, Ross Calvin, ed., (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1951), 54-57.

Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 39.

32 Cooke, *Conquest of New Mexico and California*, 61. For another opinion of New Mexico’s future, see Emory, *Lieutenant Emory Reports*, 61. As a military possession, the lieutenant believed that the territory would be of great value to the United States: “The road from Santa Fe to Fort Leavenworth presents few obstacles for a railway, and, if it continues as good to the Pacific, will be one of the routes to be considered, over which the United States will pass immense quantities of merchandise in to what may become, in time, the rich and populous States of Sonora, Durango, and Southern California.”
34 Kearny stated that in Price’s most recent correspondence, dated September 10, 1846, the lead elements of his command were only twelve miles west of the Arkansas Crossing, which would put Price’s expected arrival in Santa Fe near the end of the month. Price, in fact, arrived in Santa Fe on October 1. See Hans von Sachsen-Altenburg and Laura Gabiger, *Winning the West: General Stephen Watts Kearny’s Letter Book*, 164-5 and 168-69. Also see, Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Arizona and New Mexico, 1530-1888* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1889), 420-21.
35 Fleek, *History May Be Search in Vain*, 76.
37 As quoted in Fleek, *History May Be Search in Vain*, 75-76.
39 Although Cooke retained his rank as captain in the regular army, his transfer into the volunteer service meant that he could no longer retain his position with the First Dragoons.
40 Cooke, *Conquest of New Mexico and California*, 78.
Chapter Seven

“History May Be Searched in Vain”: March of the Mormon Battalion

As Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke rode up the Rio Grande valley toward Santa Fe his mood undoubtedly blackened as the distance separating him from General Kearny’s command grew. Since the outset of the war with Mexico, Cooke had but one aspiration: to fight conventional battles against his nation’s enemy. He sacrificed that ambition to answer Kearny’s summons to join the Army of the West. He sacrificed it again when the general sent him to Santa Fe to arrange the peaceful surrender of New Mexico. Now, it seemed his dreams of battlefield glory were going to be dashed once again by the general’s orders to assume command of the Mormon Battalion. Although the assignment was yet another reflection of the high regard in which General Kearny held him, Cooke could not overcome the idea that fate had once again abandoned him. To make matters worse, this new assignment would not only deny him the opportunity to lead K Company in the conquest of California, it would place him in command of men widely regarded as little more than religious zealots. If he believed the seizure of New Mexico was a feat that would be quickly relegated to the appendix of his country’s history, the task of leading a band of religious malcontents on a road-building expedition through desert wastelands would be even less worthy of remembrance.

Cooke arrived in Santa Fe on October 7, 1846, and while he remained bitter over his assignment, he immediately set about securing the tools, equipment, and other supplies needed to outfit his command. Unfortunately, the situation in Santa Fe did little to soothe Cooke’s strained temperament. The supply problems that plagued the Army of the West since its arrival in the New Mexican capital had yet to be corrected, and within days of his return, Cooke discovered
that many of the essential materials needed for the upcoming expedition were either in short supply or not readily available in Santa Fe. The commissary department, for example, could not fill his requisition for salt pork because “there had been none in Santa Fe for two weeks.” A clerk also informed Cooke that he would have to contract with local ranchers to obtain the cattle needed to supply the Mormons with beef.\textsuperscript{2} The quartermasters department was equally short supplied. His allotment of wagons would not exceed the number needed to carry “a pound and a half per day for each man.” There would be no allowances made for the “officer’s baggage, the company equipage, ammunition, tools, pack saddles, or sick men.” Although the quartermaster attempted to soothe Cooke’s anger by offering him six ox carts, his displeasure did not subside. Bitterly, he recorded in his journal that the quartermasters department “can, with great difficulty, furnish transportation.”\textsuperscript{3}

In August, Cooke had angrily noted that in its haste to capture New Mexico, the war department sent the Army of the West on its mission without adequate supplies or a war chest to purchase materials locally. Now, after nearly three months occupation, he was outraged to learn that “the quartermaster’s department remains without a dollar.” Although the arrival of a supply train from Bent’s Fort on October 16 would solve many of his problems, it would not erase them entirely. Cooke still needed to make purchases locally to finish outfitting the battalion. In particular, he needed to buy hundreds of mules to pull his supply wagons. Yet, the army’s recent demand for these beasts had created a shortage in the capital, and without hard currency, the army was at the mercy of local merchants who demanded premium prices as compensation for doing business without immediate payment in gold. Yet, many of the merchants in Santa Fe were hesitant to extend credit or accept government checks as payment for their merchandise.\textsuperscript{4}
His aggravations, however, were not at an end. Near midday on October 10, Cooke watched the first elements of the Mormon Battalion parade into Santa Fe’s main plaza with swords drawn and bayonets fixed. While some observers thought the volunteers looked like seasoned soldiers, it was a sentiment not shared by Cooke.\(^5\) Lacking uniforms, and wearing tattered civilian clothes, the 250 Mormons shuffling into the square looked more like a road-weary band of farmers than soldiers. In fact, aside from their weapons, the only possessions carried by the Mormons that indicated their status as soldiers were the few articles of government equipment they received at Fort Leavenworth: their haversacks, packs, and the set of white leather waist and shoulder belts from which hung their bayonets sheaths, knives, and ammunition boxes.\(^6\) Cooke scarcely expected the battalion to arrive in Santa Fe projecting the polished precision of a regular army infantry unit, but he had not anticipated such a rough lot. Unfortunately, over the next few days, as he interviewed some of the battalion’s officers, Cooke learned there were more disturbing aspects to his new command than their appearance.

Speaking with the battalion’s interim commanding officer, Lieutenant A. J. Smith, formerly of the First Dragoons, Cooke learned that the shabby collection of volunteers represented the fifty healthiest members of each company in the battalion. They separated from their comrades eight days earlier in order to arrive in Santa Fe by the deadline set by General Kearny. The balance of the battalion, some 233 Mormons, including the sick and infirmed, would be along in a couple of days. To Cooke’s growing dismay, Smith also revealed that a significant number of woman and children—the families of battalion members—were also traveling with the second squadron of volunteers.

To these troubling revelations, Smith, who joined the battalion on August 29, added more disturbing accounts of the battalion’s character that confirmed Cooke’s suspicions regarding
amateur soldiers. Elements throughout the command were fiercely defiant of military regulations: they falsified reports, refused medical treatment, and one volunteer had threatened the lieutenant with physical violence.\textsuperscript{7} Equally disturbing reports were also received by the battalion’s adjutant, Lieutenant George Dykes, a Mormon, who reported a great deal of infighting within the battalion.\textsuperscript{8} On two separate occasions, junior officers and some enlisted men had attempted to oust their company commanders because they were neglecting their religious obligations. These would-be mutineers believed the ecclesiastical laws of the church should govern the conduct of the battalion as much, if not more than military law.\textsuperscript{9} The revelation convinced Cooke that he would have to exercise a firm hand to control his Mormon charges.

Waiting until the day following the arrival of the second squadron, Cooke officially assumed command of the battalion on the morning of October 13. Directing his bugler to sound assembly, the lieutenant colonel addressed the 483 officers and enlisted men of the Mormon Battalion in gruff professional tones. Then, to the shock of the Mormons, he announced plans to reorganize the battalion in order to remove its weaknesses. Cooke ordered every volunteer to submit to an examination by the battalion’s contract surgeon, Dr. George Sanderson. Too many volunteers, he declared, had needed to be transported in wagons since leaving Fort Leavenworth due to age or illness. Furthermore, since the battalion’s arrival in Santa Fe, he deemed others to be either too old or too young to complete the expedition. Those pronounced unfit would be sent to a Mormon settlement outside modern Pueblo, Colorado. To the growing displeasure of the Mormons, Cooke also directed civilian family members to join the sick column.

In total, the battalion commander detached eighty-six volunteers—including those declared unfit for duty and the healthy husbands of twenty-five women who refused to be
separated from their spouses. Cooke, however, begrudgingly consented to allow five women, the wives of a few officers and sergeants, to accompany the battalion as laundresses—in spite of his belief that they would be a “serious encumbrance” and would “be exposed to great hardships” during the march. Cooke also made alterations to the battalion’s staff. He appointed Lieutenant Smith as battalion quartermaster and Second Lieutenant George Stoneman as assistant quartermaster. Both officers were regular army, members of the First Dragoons, and Cooke undoubtedly believed they were better suited to cut through army red tape and assist the battalion with its supply problems. Cooke also reorganized the commands of several companies to replace officers who joined the sick detachment.10 The sick column would depart Santa Fe on October 19 under the command of Captain James Brown of C Company. The aggregate strength of the battalion would be 397 men and officers.11

Although reorganizing the battalion was well within his prerogatives as commanding officer, Cooke’s decisions were vigorously protested by the Mormons. While they reluctantly acknowledged the need to detach the women, children, and weaker elements of the command, the volunteers resented the unilateral decisions of their new commanding officer—as his decisions were viewed as violations of their terms of enlistment with the battalion’s original commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel James Allen. Realizing the futility of attempting to sign up Mormons without the support of Brigham Young, Allen made three promises to the Mormon president to facilitate enlistments. First, Allen pledged the battalion would serve under no other regular army officer. If he were incapacitated or killed, command of the battalion would fall to the senior Mormon officer, Captain Jefferson Hunt. The second pledge assured the Saints that the battalion would serve as an intact unit; its companies would not be divided or dealt out to supplement other units. And finally, Allen agreed to permit the wives and families
of battalion members to follow their enlisted husbands to California. Now, within days of their arrival in Santa Fe, the army willingly broke all three without consulting the Saints.\textsuperscript{12} 

While hearing the rumblings of the volunteers, their displeasure meant little to their new commanding officer. He was also aggravated. He accepted his orders to command the battalion fully aware of the shortcomings generally presented by amateur soldiers, but he had expected the battalion would have some martial character when it arrived in Santa Fe—even for amateurs. In his estimation, the Mormons were little better than raw recruits. Still, he noted only that the volunteers demonstrated that they “were never drilled, and, though obedient, have little discipline; they exhibit great heedlessness and ignorance, and some obstinacy.” Yet the battalion commander also realized that his opinions of the battalion were equally irrelevant. His task was to lead them to California while building a wagon road. The challenge before him, as with any group of new recruits, was to transform them into soldiers.\textsuperscript{13} 

Yet, in order to transform the Mormons into an effective military organization, he needed to overcome less obvious obstacles created by the unique background of his volunteers. The Mormons were members of a viciously persecuted religious minority, and while Cooke was aware of the bitterness many within the battalion held toward federal authority, it is doubtful Cooke appreciated the extent of these feelings. Over the previous decade, the federal government had done nothing to stem the tide of political persecutions and mob violence that led to their expulsions from Missouri and Illinois. As a result the Saints had few reasons to support the war against Mexico or embrace their temporary condition as soldiers. In fact, before their enlistments, several future battalion members were shocked that the government would have the temerity to ask them to volunteer. Henry W. Bigler noted: “It looked hard when we called to mind the mobbing . . . the killing of our leaders, the burning of our homes . . . forcing us to leave
the States and Uncle Sam take no notice of it and then to call on us to help fight his battle.”14

Daniel B. Rawson was equally offended: “I felt indignant toward the Government that had suffered me to be raided and driven from my home. I made the uncouth remark that ‘I would see them all damned and in Hell.’”15

Consequently, when the battalion mustered into service in June, the majority of those who volunteered did so not from any sense of patriotism, but as a call to duty to serve their church. The new president and prophet of their faith, Brigham Young urged his exiled followers to put aside their anger and make a distinction between the federal government that was offering possible salvation to the church, and the state governments of Missouri and Illinois that actively sought its destruction.16 By enlisting in the battalion, volunteers would provide the means with which the church could begin its exodus from the east and establish its Zion in the West. As advertised by the army, Young stressed to his followers that enlisting in the battalion would allow the Saints to send “a portion of their young and intelligent men to the ultimate destination of their whole people, entirely at the expense of the United States, and . . . pave the way and look out the land for their brethren to come after them.”17

Thus Young secured the enlistments of nearly five hundred of his followers by diminishing the martial requirements of military service, and by casting the formation of the Mormon Battalion as a call from God to render service to the church. While the battalion’s volunteers enlisted under the guise of assisting the United States with the conquest of California, they believed their greater purpose was to serve as the vanguard for Mormon settlement in the West. Elements among the volunteers, therefore, viewed the creation of the battalion as a government-funded church enterprise in which military authority was subject to church doctrine.
After reorganizing the battalion, Cooke focused his attentions on the final preparations for the expedition. Although he had secured the necessary quantities of flour, sugar, coffee, salt pork, and a beef herd, plus the necessary tools to build the wagon road, he remained concerned over the condition of his mules. He undoubtedly hoped that those arriving with the battalion would be able to shoulder the lion’s share of the expedition’s wagons. The Mormons’ mules, however, were nearly as worn as the volunteers’ clothing. In his journal, Cooke fretted that “the mules that came with the battalion are entirely broken down.” Although the quartermasters had secured a limited number of mules for the battalion’s use, Cooke noted that “those that have been procured here are quite unfit.” In fact, all the animals observed by Cooke appeared to “deteriorate every hour for want of food.”18 Unsure of their stamina, Cooke ordered the battalion to abandon its heavy cooking equipment in order to lighten its wagons. Ovens and skillets were to be left in Santa Fe, and to reduce the number of camp kettles carried in the wagons, Cooke increased the size of company messes to ten men instead of the traditional six.19

Between supply and equipment shortages, the unmilitary condition of his command, and the sad state of his draft animals, Cooke was not brimming with confidence on the eve of the expedition’s start: “everything conspired to discourage the extraordinary undertaking of marching this battalion eleven hundred miles . . . through an unknown wilderness without road or trail, and with a wagon train.”20 Yet, on October 19, 1846, the lieutenant colonel initiated the expedition to California by directing the battalion to make the six-mile trek to the neighboring village of Agua Fria. As a brief march, it would serve as a test for the volunteers—especially since Cooke planned to remain in Santa Fe to tend to a few lingering logistical matters.21

Cooke made the brief ride to join his command that evening in the company of guide, Pauline Weaver, and interpreter, Dr. Stephen Foster, whose services were secured that afternoon.
As he approached the battalion’s camp site, however, he was not pleased with the conditions he observed. Much of the command’s livestock stood along a sandy stretch of bottomland where there was little grass for the animals to graze and no guards to prevent them from straying. He then discovered the battalion had established its camp in an arroyo—a natural drainage or wash prone to flash floods and a dangerous location to camp in given the unpredictability of New Mexico’s weather. He also learned that Captain Jesse Hunter, Company B, had returned to Santa Fe to recover a lost mule. While he could do little at that moment with regards to Captain Hunter, the battalion commander wasted little time rousing his command and correcting the other errors in judgment made by his subordinates.22

The following morning Cooke said little save to give the order to move on to the village of Gallisteeo, which was ten miles distant. Wishing to evaluate the battalion as it marched Cooke rode about the column inspecting the conduct of his soldiers. It was an arduous undertaking. The Mormon column stretched over a mile in length to accommodate the forty-two government and civilian wagons that were interspersed among the five companies of volunteers.23 Again, he was not pleased. Stemming from their lack of training or their half-hearted dedication to their duties, the volunteers committed a number of offences. Many did not carry their government issued equipment. Instead, they stowed their packs, blankets, and haversacks in privately owned wagons to ease their burdens. Then, during an afternoon stop to water the battalion’s draft animals, the teamsters simply drove their wagons into a stream. The animals were not freed from their hitches, which as Cooke noted, made it very difficult for them to drink. When he inquired why the teamsters were not using buckets to water their animals if they were not going to unhitch them from the wagons, he learned the battalion had no buckets because none were to be had in Santa Fe!24
Troubled by his observations, Cooke compiled a brief list of regulations to establish discipline among the volunteers after the battalion encamped on October 20. While their appearance might continue to betray their condition as soldiers, Cooke knew that by forcing the Mormons to meet the rigid standards of army regulations he could do much to improve martial spirit of the battalion. Furthermore, by demanding the volunteers conform to regulations regarding the care of the battalion’s mules and oxen, Cooke hoped to prolong the service life of his draft animals. Beginning with reveille, the battalion’s daily routine would follow the heavily regimented patterns of a regular army unit. The volunteers were to turn out for reveille fully armed and equipped, and company officers were to conduct daily inspections to ensure all volunteers were in compliance. Company reports were to be filed quickly and accurately and turned into the adjutant within ten minutes of inspection. Battalion members were to carry their muskets, ammunition boxes, and knapsacks throughout the day, and no one was permitted to wander more than a quarter of a mile away from their company without permission from the commanding officer. Every man in the battalion was also charged with the care of the live stock, but Cooke demanded each company’s non-commissioned officers and teamsters to be especially mindful of the animals and “do the best for them as possible.”

Cooke’s sudden introduction of military discipline met with mixed reactions. Private William Coray, who earlier recorded that “from the very onset we had taken a dislike to him,” was outraged by the punishment Cooke ordered for Captain Hunter. In his journal, Coray fumed: “Capt. Hunter, having lost one of his mules, left camp to hunt it without permission from His Excellency, for which cause he ordered him under arrest as soon as he arrived and made him march in rear of his co. for three days without his sabre . . . .” Sergeant Daniel Tyler, on the other hand, found Cooke’s demonstration reassuring: “His theory was that officers should obey
first, and set the example to the men. The first breach of the regulations was by an officer, and it was promptly punished . . . By this move the Battalion learned that if their new commander was strict in his discipline, he was impartial, as officers would be held to the same accountability as soldiers.”

Discipline problems, however, continued to characterize the behavior of the battalion as it marched alongside the Rio Grande during the opening weeks of the campaign. As if intentionally testing their commanding officer, the volunteers repeatedly defied regulations and ignored orders. While volunteer units were notorious for permitting eased levels of discipline throughout the nineteenth century, Cooke was a career army officer and incapable of granting such dispensations to his soldiers. When volunteers violated his regulations, the veteran officer resorted to variety of disciplinary measures designed to force compliance by making examples of the offenders. On October 25, for example, Cooke stripped a sergeant of his rank for failing to assemble his squad at reveille because, as the man later claimed, “it was not light enough to call his roll.” Later, he ordered two privates to march bound to their company wagons for failing to salute an officer. He reissued the punishment a month later when another soldier was caught stealing rations.

Yet the most frustrating, and potentially devastating, offence stemmed from the inability of the overnight camp guards to prevent stock from straying. During the battalion’s first night out of Santa Fe, for example, the guards allowed thirty-three animals to wander from their corral. Cooke punished the errant soldiers, as well as all subsequent offenders, by ordering them into the desert on foot to round up all the animals before returning to camp. Although the number of straying stock animals declined, the problem did not entirely stop until Cooke informed his company commanders of the full extent of his wartime authority. Wryly the army veteran stated
that a soldier caught sleeping on guard duty could be put to death during time of war. By the end of the month, Cooke noted that the problem of straying livestock essentially stopped.

By stubbornly resisting his regulations, the volunteers compelled Cooke to keep a constant vigil. Throughout the first weeks of the expedition, the battalion commander confirmed his reputation as a stern taskmaster by ceaselessly patrolling the column during the daily marches and barking profanity-filled orders at his troops. While accomplishing his purposes, the extra workload did little to change his attitude regarding volunteer soldiers. On November 1, for example, Cooke vented to his journal:

“A dumb spirit has possessed all for the last twenty-four hours, and not one in ten of my orders has been understood and obeyed. All the vexations and troubles of any other three days of my life have not equaled those of the said twenty-four hours . . . . My attention is constantly on the stretch for the smallest things. I have to order, and then see that it is done. There is a wonderful amount of stolidity, ignorance, negligence, and obstinacy, which I have to contend against.”

Still, Cooke’s scrutiny of the battalion extended beyond his desire to enforce discipline. Aware that most of his officers were as inexperienced and untrained as the enlisted men, Cooke assumed the unorthodox practice of personally training of his volunteers by offering them instruction in a variety of tasks normally assigned to junior officers or noncommissioned officers. On October 21, for example, Cooke instructed teamsters on the proper way to water the battalion’s draft animals during the march—stressing the need to unhitch the animals so they could drink without obstruction. South of Valencia, after several mules were observed with sore shoulders, Cooke assembled the officers from each company and demonstrated the proper techniques for harnessing and hitching draft animals to reduce muscle strain and fatigue. On October 30, near La Joya, where the battalion collected Cooke’s personal wagons, the lieutenant
Colonel directed the enlisted men as they built a road over a canal, and later that day, he also supervised their use of tow ropes and double teams to pull their wagons over a series of steep hills covered with deep sands.\textsuperscript{34}

While his close supervision of the volunteers was slowly solving the battalion’s disciplinary problems and earning him the respect of his volunteers, Cooke struggled to resolve the supply and transportation problems created by the shortages in Santa Fe. As the battalion passed the towns, villages, and rancheros dotting the Rio Grande Valley, the colonel attempted to purchase cattle and sheep for his commissary and replacement mules to relieve his worn teams. To his growing consternation, however, the residents of central and southern New Mexico were as reluctant to trade with the army as the merchants in Santa Fe. Despite his efforts, Cooke found no one willing to sell cattle. His attempts to buy sheep were equally unsuccessful until October 29, when his quartermaster managed to purchase a flock of 380 scrawny sheep near La Joya. As a result, Cooke was forced to take extreme measures to extend his commissary stores for as long as possible. Reluctantly the battalion commander put his volunteers on three-quarters rations and declared that no cattle were to be slaughtered unless the animals were incapable of continuing the expedition.\textsuperscript{35}

Mules also continued to be an exceedingly difficult commodity to acquire. Although a few merchants along the way were willing to exchange one healthy mule for two of Cooke’s exhausted animals—a standard practice—these transactions were rarely completed without additional compensation to sweeten the deal. Still, just as often as not, the New Mexicans were wholly uncooperative. They refused to exchange their livestock or accept government drafts as payment. Others simply demanded prices that were too steep for the quality of animals they possessed.\textsuperscript{36} With no alternatives, Cooke became resigned to the idea that the battalion had no
choice but to undertake its journey into the unknown with insufficient supplies and inferior draft animals.

Luckily, on October 24, Cooke encountered a detachment of dragoons south of Albuquerque that was returning to Santa Fe under the command of Captain J.H.K. Burgwin. Among these former comrades, Cooke found some of the best trading partners he would encounter during the entire expedition. Burgwin readily exchanged eight sturdy mules from his herd for an equal number of the battalion’s broken down animals. Cooke also purchased an additional eight mules from other dragoon officers. Burgwin also traded three of his wagons, including two pontoon wagons, for three damaged wagons from battalion’s supply train. With the last exchange, the dragoon captain also included a small herd of twenty oxen.37

In Burgwin’s camp, Cooke also met up with a scout sent from Kearny who would play a vital role in the expedition: Jean Baptiste Charbonneau. At 41, Charbonneau was an elite member of the Rocky Mountain fur trade fraternity, having honed his skills under the tutelage of men like Jim Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick, William Sublette, and Jim Beckwourth. Moreover, he possessed a frontier pedigree that was second to none. His mother was Sacajawea, the Shoshone teenager who served as a guide and translator for Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery on its epic journey to the Pacific Coast of North America. His adopted father was the Corps of Discovery’s co-commander, William Clark. Intelligent, well-educated, fluent in several European and Native American languages, Charbonneau stood in remarkable contrast to the popular image of a nineteenth-century frontiersman. Although he was unfamiliar with the territory through which the battalion would pass, Charbonneau’s impact on the expedition was immediate. After separating from Kearny, the scout explored the Rio Grande for approximately one hundred miles beyond the point where the general’s dragoons departed for the Gila River.
Hinting that trade roads connecting settlements in northern Chihuahua and Sonora could be easily followed to the Gila, Charbonneau suggested the battalion march nearly to El Paso del Norte before turning west.  

By the third week of the expedition, the journey through the Rio Grande Valley had turned into a seemingly endless series of trials for the battalion members. Frequent winter storms produced chilling rains that drenched the men and their equipment, and saturated the soil. Mud produced by the downpours bogged down the men, livestock, and wagons, and sapped strength by requiring the frequent use of tow ropes and double teams to clear. Yet, their journey over the dry desert terrain was often just as challenging. Deep sands also occasionally swallowed the hooves of draft animals as well as the narrow wagon wheels, and demanded similar exertions to pass. Under fed and over worked, every member of the expedition became dazed with fatigue. The weakest members of the command also contracted a variety of illnesses that quickly filled Dr. Sanderson’s hospital wagons. The battalion’s draft animals simply gave out. While the mules’ hardy constitutions allowed them to recover after a few days of being driven with the commissary herd, the battalion’s oxen were often beyond recovery. These bulls regularly collapsed in their yokes and had to be drug from the road in order to make way for replacements. If they did not soon recover, the exhausted animals were summarily transformed into rations.

On November 3, another guide sent from General Kearny found the battalion’s camp near modern Val Verde, New Mexico. Having traveled nearly to the Gila with the general, Antoine Leroux had been sent back to deliver the disheartening news that the distance to California was far greater than anticipated. Instead of a sixty-day journey, the guide reported that it would take at least ninety days to reach California. He also warned Cooke that it would be impossible to
follow the general’s course with wagons. Revealing that Kearny’s trail was laced with rugged mountain crossings and terrain so broken that the general’s mules had difficulty passing, Leroux convinced Cooke to lead the battalion on a route similar to that suggested by Charbonneau a week earlier. Although the new scout was equally unfamiliar with the territory rising between the Gila and the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico, Leroux was intimately acquainted with the Gila Valley, and its tributaries, from his years as a fur trapper. By pushing the battalion approximately eighty miles beyond the point where Kearny had left the Rio Grande, Leroux believed the battalion could establish a better and shorter road by seeking out the headwaters of the Rio San Pedro—a southern tributary to the Gila.  

While satisfied that the southern route would be the better course for the battalion to follow, Cook remained troubled by Leroux’s pronouncements. Now he had to make the difficult decision of devising a way to make sixty-days worth of rations last for ninety days. If he continued to issue the men three quarters rations, he quickly realized his food supplies would be exhausted well before the battalion reached California. After repeatedly calculating the extent of his supplies, Cooke finally concluded there were no other alternatives but to put the battalion on half rations: 9 ounces of flour and 10 ounces of meat per day, per man. If his calculations were correct, the rations would last the projected ninety days. 

To no one’s surprise, Cooke’s decision reignited the rift that lingered among the disgruntled elements of the battalion. Among the many diarists who recorded their anger, Private William Coray’s entry was among the bitterest. He declared that Cooke’s decision was based more his own vainglorious ambitions than the logistical and financial deficiencies of the army in New Mexico. Corey insisted the colonel cruelly ignored opportunities to purchase mules and supplies from a settlement that was only three day’s march beyond the route of the
battalion. The private concluded that his commanding officer intended to jeopardize the health of the Mormons because “he wanted to make California as soon as possible in order to raise his name in the world by performing a trip with less means and less humanity than any other man.”

Still, Leroux’s disturbing revelations had an undeniable impact on the battalion commander. By November 9, the deteriorated condition of his command forced Cooke to recognize that the expedition stood at a crossroad. In his journal, the veteran campaigner announced, “It has now become evident to all that we cannot go on . . . with any prospect of a successful or safe termination to the expedition.” In a matter of days, he would turn the battalion away from the Rio Grande and commence the next phase of the expedition across a vast and largely unknown expanse toward the Rio San Pedro. His draft animals were too worn to continue negotiating the broken landscape bearing the battalion’s overloaded wagons, and his men were showing the ill effects of their extreme labors on their limited diet. Several appeared to be on the brink of exhaustion, twenty-two others were listed on the hospital rolls, and two volunteers had succumbed to illness.

Defiantly, Cooke halted the expedition, and again, reorganized the battalion. He ordered those declared unfit for duty to join their comrades at the winter camp in Pueblo. In total fifty-eight volunteers, including those on the hospital rolls and thirty three of “the least efficient men” were assigned to the sick column. They would begin their march to Colorado under Lieutenant Wesley W. Willis the next day. Then, to reduce the weight of the battalion’s company wagons, Cooke reorganized company messes and discarded any items deemed unnecessary. Each company was to carry only one camp kettle for every nine of its remaining volunteers. Extra tent halves and all tent poles were sacrificed. For the duration of the march, the volunteers would
construct their tents from an improvised pattern and substitute their muskets for the abandoned tent poles.\textsuperscript{45}

By streamlining the composition of the battalion, Cooke believed his command gained the advantages it needed to complete its march. Although the sick detachment would take nearly a ton of rations on their return journey, their departure secured an additional seven days worth of beef from the battalion’s cattle, which permitted Cooke to increase slightly the battalion’s daily meat rations. Moreover, by dramatically reducing the materials carried in the supply train, Cooke reduced the number of wagons needed by the battalion and spared approximately thirty mules and ten oxen from their daily turns in harnesses. These animals, however, would not be permitted merely to wander alongside the battalion. By loading them with pack saddles carefully filled with supplies and equipment, Cooke further reduced the amount of weight carried in the battalion’s remaining wagons.\textsuperscript{46}

Cooke also determined to utilize his scouts in a more efficient manner for the next leg of the march. Not wanting to travel as far south as El Paso, Cooke needed to turn the battalion out of the Rio Grande Valley as soon as practicable. He ordered his guides to ride ahead of the battalion as a unit and scout the terrain west of the river in order to mark the best point of departure. Once the scouts discovered a course that would offer the greatest access to water, one was to return to the battalion and serve as a guide. Mindful of the fact that the expedition was entering territory controlled more by Navajo and Apache warriors than Mexicans, the remaining scouts were to continue ranging over the territory, repeating the process until there were too few to safely continue. While anxious to begin his western march, the battalion commander reminded his guides that the most efficient course for the battalion to follow would be one that offered the greatest access to water and not necessarily the most direct route to California.\textsuperscript{47}
Cooke finally turned the battalion toward the western horizon on November 13, 1846. Late in the morning, as the battalion neared modern Hatch, New Mexico, Cooke discovered a note from Leroux that promised water after a march of only fifteen miles. For Cooke there was an element of excitement due to his realization that he and his volunteers were about to venture into a region of the continent scarcely known by anyone save the Indians and Mexicans who called the desert their home. Yet, for the Mormon volunteers, their departure from the Rio Grande Valley signaled a final division from those who had been sent to Colorado. Like their commanding officer, however, the Mormons recognized that the separations were necessary—not simply for the success of the expedition, but to spare the lives of those whose constitution would not stand up to the rigors of the march. As one of Cooke’s fiercest critics, Private William Coray, observed, “I do not know but it is for the best for they were mostly invalids who went back.”

Led by two scouts, Cooke pushed the remaining 335 volunteers across the dry and varied landscape rising toward the water promised in Leroux’s note. Although their course led the expedition over several inclines, the journey was rather pleasant compared to those of previous days. Finally, as the sun began to set, the battalion descended onto a broad prairie northeast of Nutt Mountain that signaled their approach to the well discovered days earlier by the battalion’s interpreter, Dr. Stephen Foster. As the lead elements neared the site that would soon be labeled Foster’s Hole, they immediately dropped their packs and rushed forward to quench their thirsts. But as the men climbed down into the recess concealing the water, an exasperated Cooke suddenly appeared on the upper rim of the well and unleashed a stream of profanity-filled orders reminding the volunteers of their obligations to the livestock. Insisting the Mormons care for the herd animals before they tended to their own needs, Cooke demanded the volunteers return to
their companies, organize their livestock, and form a bucket relays to lower water into troughs at the base of the well. It was, unfortunately, the first of several such unpleasant lessons Cooke would instill upon the battalion before the expedition ended.

Beginning on November 14, Cooke followed the course set by his guides for the next seven days. Although they led the battalion on a line that was only a few degrees west of south, Cooke did not question their route—largely due to the ease of travel and their successes locating water. Realizing his guides were as unfamiliar with the territory through which the battalion passed as he was, Cooke granted these frontiersmen considerable leeway: “I have no guide that knows anything about the country, and I fear such exploring, as we go will be very slow or hazardous work.”

As the column angled toward a small range of mountains that would soon bear Cooke’s name, the expedition again fell into the dull rhythms of a campaign. Unlike their trek through the Rio Grande Valley, however, Cooke did not force the battalion to endure daily marches. To spare his weary volunteers and livestock, he established an irregular pattern of fatigue days wherein the battalion remained encamped at sites offering sufficient water, fuel, and forage whenever he determined a rest necessary. On November 20, however, the comfortable routine came to a sudden halt south of the Mimbres River when the battalion’s scouts reported that they had been unable to find “any indications of water,” save a small muddy hole ten miles beyond the battalion’s location.

Discouraged by the report, Cooke gathered his scouts to discuss the limits of their explorations. After nearly seven days of traveling more south than west, Cooke was anxious to turn the battalion and push on to the San Pedro River, which he believed to be due west of their location. As the men discussed their situation, a party of Mexican traders was sighted moving
toward the battalion from the southwest. Believing the merchants would have better knowledge of the country than his scouts, Cooke ordered signal fires built to attract their attention. Unfortunately, once the merchants arrived, the information they provided shed little light on the battalion’s predicament. They revealed that there were only two locations where water could be had between the battalion’s present location and an abandoned cattle ranch called San Bernardino, some eighty miles to the southwest. The traders advised Cooke to follow a nearby road that connected the deserted copper mines outside modern Silver City, New Mexico, with the town of Janos in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. According to the traders, once the battalion reached Janos, Cooke would discover another well-traveled road that led to the town of Fronteras, in modern Arizona, that would take his battalion directly to the abandoned San Bernardino Ranch. More importantly, the roads described by the traders offered the battalion greater access to water and opportunities to acquire food and mules.53

Unsure of the proper course to follow, Cooke used the excuse that his mules needed a rest while he considered his options. Although the Mexican traders assured Cooke that the journey to Janos added only four days travel to the San Pedro, he did not want to venture that far south. By his calculations, the battalion had enough cattle and salt pork for seventy-seven days, and enough flour to furnish rations for seventy-nine days. Still, by adding four days to the expedition, if his calculations were correct, he would exhaust his food supply before he reached California. In addition, General Kearny’s orders directed Cooke to make his march to California by way of the Gila River. If he diverted his route too far south, he believed he might violate the spirit of Kearny’s directive. Moreover, the battalion might come under the command of General John E. Wool and be redeployed for the duration of the war. On the other hand, if he defied the advice of
the Mexican traders and followed a westerly course, he risked the lives of every man under his command.\textsuperscript{54}

After consulting with his officers, Cooke decided to heed the advice of the traders and follow the Janos Road. Yet, as word spread through the battalion about the impending march, many of the enlisted men became discouraged. They worried that by extending their march too deeply into Mexican territory, they not only ran the risk of falling under Wool’s command, the likelihood of a confrontation with Mexican troops greatly increased. Of greatest concern, however, was the possibility that they might not arrive in California before the Church. In fact, by early evening, Privates David Pettegrew and Levi Hancock, both members of the Mormon priesthood, were so discouraged they circulated throughout the encampment and urged their brother Mormons to earnestly, “pray to the Lord to change the Colonel’s mind.”\textsuperscript{55}

On the morning of November 21, Cooke assembled the battalion and gave the order to move out on the Janos Road. For a couple of miles, the command pushed on in typical fashion: the guides ranged ahead of the main column and marked the road, while a pioneer party followed at a distance to clear obstacles. The five Mormon companies followed, with the volunteers marching to the rear of their respective wagons. They were followed by the hospital wagons, supply train, private wagons, stock herd, and rear guard. Suddenly, Cooke noticed the road turned abruptly to the left—leading the column away from the smooth prairie over which they had been traveling toward a ridge that dropped off to the east. Quickly surveying the terrain, Cooke gruffly shouted for the battalion to halt.

According to Private Henry Bigler, Cooke suddenly declared that he was not “going all around the world to get to California.”\textsuperscript{56} Sergeant Daniel Tyler recalled that Cooke announced, “I don’t want to get under General Wool, and lose my trip to California.” Then, punctuating his
next statement with several oaths, Cooke declared, “This is not my course. I was ordered to California; and . . . I will go there or die in the attempt!” Turning to his bugler, he then called for the trooper to “blow to the right.”\textsuperscript{57}

As the call echoed through the valley, many within the battalion were elated. Convinced that the Almighty had secured the change in orders, Father Pettegrew reportedly exclaimed, “God Bless the Colonel!” Cooke failed to cite divine inspiration for his new orders. He simply declared that he would not allow the battalion to be turned east: “After proceeding a mile and a half, without any further consultation, I turned short to the right, and directed the march to the hole of water which had been discovered to the south-west.”\textsuperscript{58}

Of course, not every member of the battalion shared the enlisted men’s joy. Dr. Sanderson believed Cooke was taking a needless risk. While admitting that travel toward Janos would likely result in a clash with Mexican troops, the doctor believed the possibility combat was a better alternative to dying of thirst. Critical of Cooke for launching the battalion “out on a plain due West never before traveled,” the doctor recorded in his journal, “for my part I would prefer dying on the battle field to perishing in the desert.”\textsuperscript{59}

Had the volunteers realized the difficulties that lay ahead, they would not have celebrated Cooke’s decision so enthusiastically. Although Cooke’s scouts found an unexpectedly abundant supply of water during the afternoon, the battalion suffered greatly during the next two days. Forging their way through the desolate plain west of modern Deming, New Mexico, on November 22, the battalion embarked on a series of forced marches that would cover nearly forty waterless miles during the next thirty six hours. The good cheer that swept through the battalion the day before, slowly faded as the hours passed and canteens emptied. By the following afternoon, the battalion’s trail across the Chihuahuan Desert could be followed by the clusters of
dehydration and dehydrated volunteers and failed teams. The spectacle prompted Dr. Sanderson to pessimistically observe: “a good deal of dissatisfaction among the Mormons and officers of the Battalion, and should we fail to get water to night our campaign is at an end.”

By the early afternoon of December 23, the first elements of the battalion reached the water promised by the Mexican merchants. But as the men gathered around the small pool, they were shattered by what they saw. As one volunteer bitterly declared, “after twelve miles’ travel came to a hole or crevice in a rock . . . there was, perhaps water enough to give each man a half pint.” The disillusioned men, however, had little time to contemplate their find. Within moments, the battalion commander and his staff rode into the area and also surveyed the meager offerings. To the horror of the enlisted men, Cooke turned to his companions, and in a low tone, announced, “The men can do without water better than the animals.” He then ordered the Mormons to stand aside while the mules he and his staff rode were allowed to drain the shallow well. When the animals finished, the parched men rushed the hole and used spoons to dip out what remained.

Although he was undoubtedly aware of the indignant glares of his soldiers, Cooke thought little of the incident. In his journal Cooke simply noted, “There was not enough of water for the men to drink, and it leaked slowly into the little crevices of rocks and stones.” Cooke’s indifference, perhaps, stemmed from reports received from his scouts that water had been found in abundance “three leagues further,” about nine miles, beyond the dry bed of Playas Lake. As cruel as his actions were, he ensured his troops would have no choice but to press on to the more abundant water source beyond Playas Lake. Others, however, clearly did not share Cooke’s opinion. Captain Jefferson Hunt, for example, sought out Cooke and vigorously condemned the
colonel’s actions. Fortunately, the stamina of most battalion members held, and by dusk, the first volunteers and company wagons arrived at the campsite adjacent to the waterholes.61

For several members of the battalion, however, their labors were not at an end. Knowing their comrades were scattered for miles along the back trail, several Mormons volunteered to fill canteens and ride back to deliver water. Slowly, as individuals and small groups, the volunteers filed into the campsite throughout the night. As many were too exhausted to erect their shelters or their company wagons had yet to finish the march, the enlisted men slept exposed on the ground. The last group of stragglers did not make their way across the dry lake until after seven o’clock the following morning.62

Aware that his soldiers and livestock were near the limits of their endurance, Cooke withheld orders to resume the march on November 24. It was a decision that yielded unintended benefits. During their morning reconnaissance, Cooke’s scouts encountered another party of Mexicans merchants who had been trading with Apaches. Unlike the party encountered near the Janos Road, however, these merchants readily cooperated with the Americans. In addition to selling twenty-one mules to the quartermaster and a sizable amount of dried beef to individual battalion members, one of the traders agreed to show Cooke’s scouts the road to the San Bernardino Ranch. The merchant also agreed to open communications with the Apaches and bring them to the deserted ranch to trade. According to the merchant-guide, the Apaches had recently raided the Mexican settlement of Oposura, where they acquired plenty of mules. In the meantime, the merchants assured Cooke that ground he would cross to reach the ranch would be well suited for a road. Better still the battalion commander could expect to find plenty of water.63
Led by their new Mexican guide, the battalion crossed the continental divide and entered the Animas Valley on November 25. Compared to the trackless wasteland through which the volunteers had passed, the Animas Valley seemed like paradise. Nestled between the Animas Mountains on the east and the Guadalupe Mountains to the west, the narrow valley floor stretched before the battalion covered in gamma and buffalo grass. In addition to providing the battalion with a smoother course and plentiful water, the valley also provided the Mormons an abundance of wild game to augment their meager rations. Although the enlisted men were not permitted to hunt, the guides regularly brought deer, antelope, and fowl into camp. In fact, during the battalion’s first day in the valley, Charbonneau provided the volunteers with a rare treat, fresh bear meat from a grizzly he shot while scouting ahead of the expedition.  

By its third day in the Animas Valley, the battalion fell upon a well traveled road leading into the Guadalupe Mountains near present-day Cloverdale, New Mexico. Believing the road led to a pass through the mountains that intersected the Janos-Fronteras Road, the battalion followed its climbing course for approximately six miles until it suddenly fell away at the edge of a steeply descending slope. Confused by the unexpected development, Cooke ordered a halt while he and another scout searched the area for an alternate course. Finding nothing, Cooke returned to the battalion and awaited the return of his scouts. Yet, as each returned, they insisted they had thoroughly explored the area and swore the battalion was on the road indicated by the Mexican merchant before he departed. In fact, as if to legitimate his claims, Leroux brought a drunken Apache chief before Cooke who confirmed that battalion was on the right trail.

Convinced by the assertions of his guides, Cooke spent the next two days supervising construction crews as they hacked a passage wide enough to accommodate the wagons. He also sent Lieutenant Stoneman and a detail with the battalion’s mules to haul supplies and equipment.
around the base of the mountain. Unfortunately, after two days of exhausting labor, Dr. Foster entered the expedition’s camp in the Guadalupe Valley with a forlorn look on his face and delivered a bit of disheartening news. Earlier, while exploring south of the battalion’s position, he discovered another road leading from the mountains. Tracing it course, Foster discovered that it led over a natural gap in the range. The battalion had missed the Guadalupe Pass by less than a mile. By his own admission, Cooke was “mortified.” It was, he later learned, the only pass “for many hundred miles to the south” accessible to wagons. To spare future travelers, Cooke ordered Foster to return to the gap, ride to its eastern base, and erect a sign.

Contrary to Leroux’s prediction, the battalion required two days to reach the abandoned, but picturesque San Bernardino Ranch. Standing in a broad valley with “a fine stream” flowing near the hacienda-styled house, the site seemed an ideal location to rest and trade with local Apaches. Establishing the battalion’s camp “near the old house,” Cooke awaited news from his scouts regarding the arrival of the Apache. Although his mules had held up well, he wanted to replace the weakest animals in the herd. Over the next two days, however, only a few dozen Indians visited the hacienda—and they brought few mules to trade. The Apache were afraid to come into the ranch because they feared an attack by the soldiers. Although disappointed, Cooke remained at the San Bernardino a total of three days. In addition to giving the battalion a much-needed rest, the ranch offered other significant benefits. Several thousand head of wild cattle roamed the ranch, offering the battalion an unexpected opportunity to replenish its meat supply. Rather than issue rations from the commissary, each day Cooke ordered hunting parties to harvest beef from the ranch’s herd. In addition to allowing his soldiers the rare opportunity to sleep with full bellies, the extended stay also afforded his livestock the ability to put on weight and regain their strength.
The battalion resumed its march at one o’clock in the afternoon on December 4. Leaving the pleasant surroundings of the abandoned cattle ranch, the expedition slowly moved off on a northwesterly course for the San Pedro River. Yet, before the battalion got fully underway, Cooke had to remind his rear guard of their martial responsibilities. Three days of idleness and full bellies had not only restored their health, but the defiant spirits of a few volunteers. Inspecting the column, Cooke discovered the rear guards were not carrying their muskets. When questioned, the errant soldiers attempted to defend their breach of regulations by arguing that it was pointless to carry their muskets since the colonel had forbidden them to carry loaded weapons. Ignoring an obvious flaw in their logic, the men also claimed that since the equipment was being carried in a civilian wagon the colonel had no authority to tell its owner what he could or could not carry in his property. Suppressing his anger, Cooke’s response was curt. According to William Bigler, one of the guilty guardsmen, the colonel fixed his glare upon them, and declared “he did not care a damn, you shall carry them.”

In spite of the awkward start, the journey through southeastern Arizona was fairly pleasant, and by December 9, the battalion reached the San Pedro River. Although temperatures at night frequently produced hard frosts and partially froze water in containers, the days remained comfortable and mild. Fatted wild cattle continued to provide the battalion with fresh meat, and between rain showers, the commissary staff smoked a sizable quantity of the beef. Even the livestock seemed to benefit from the straw-like grasses offered along the foothills that surrounded the battalion. Thanks to the acquisition of a few extra kegs to store water, the twenty-seven miles passed without finding water were considerably less painful. In fact, the only noteworthy incident that occurred took place on December 11, when the column was suddenly attacked by a dozen or more enraged bulls. Racing toward the ranks, the bulls scattered
volunteers and used their horns with devastating effect on those too slow to find cover. Within moments, the bulls disemboweled several mules, severely gored one volunteer, and nearly crushed another. Reacting quickly to the commotion, Cooke deployed a squad of volunteers unaffected by the stampede and directed their counterattack. Shouting orders rapidly, Cooke directed the startled men to fire a volley at the rampaging animals. Ten bulls were killed instantly—one, in fact, landed within feet of the battalion commander—but the attack was over. Days earlier, he noted that the cattle wandering the San Bernardino Ranch were as hard to kill as buffalo on the plains, and after this engagement, he needed no further demonstration to confirm his opinion.

Cooke, however, had little opportunity to speculate on the causes of the stampede. On December 12, as his command recovered from the “Battle of the Bulls,” Cooke’s scouts informed him that the battalion was nearing the pueblo of Tucson and he needed to decide whether wanted to pass through the outpost or bypass it. Since leaving the Rio Grande Valley, the battalion commander had taken great measures to avoid Mexican population centers like Tucson to minimize his risk of a confrontation. With a population of approximately five hundred residents, and supported by a garrison of Mexican regulars with artillery, if hostile, marching on Tucson could be disastrous for the battalion. While Cooke had no respect for Mexican soldiers, he did not wish to engage them while commanding marginally trained and untested volunteers. Aside from the obvious risks presented by a battle, there was little to be gained from an engagement in such a remote location—it offered no tactical or strategic benefits.

His option, however, was equally unappealing. If he bypassed the pueblo, his battalion faced an eighty-mile trek through broken canyon land that followed the course of the Gila River.
Although the physical condition of his troops had improved, Cooke did not wish to subject them to the rigors promised by the detour.

As Cooke contemplated his options, two vital pieces of information ultimately decided his course of action. Leroux reported that during the morning reconnaissance, his party stumbled across a group of Apaches and Mexicans distilling mescal at a deserted ranch fifteen miles from the village. Posing as trappers, the scouts learned that General Kearny had been through the area roughly three weeks earlier and had negotiated an agreement “by which Americans could pass anywhere.” The report confirmed intelligence received earlier that described an antagonistic relationship between the State of Sonora and the Mexican government. On December 6, Cooke recorded that Sonora’s governor opposed the war against the United States, and had refused to contribute money to Mexico’s war effort. The governor reputedly argued that since the Mexican government offered the people of Sonora no protection against marauding Apache warriors, the people of Sonora were not obliged to support Mexico. While he remained apprehensive, Cooke chose to march directly at Tucson. As he noted in his journal, “it is too much in my way, and would put the command to too severe a trial to go round.” Furthermore, by entering Tucson, the lieutenant colonel hoped to acquire additional stores of flour. Still, Cooke would take no chances. As he advanced his command, he conducted drills at the company and battalion levels to prepare for a possible confrontation.

Pushing his soldiers nearly thirty miles over the next two days, Cooke reached the site of the mescal distillery on December 14. There he met with a Mexican sergeant who seemed quite undisturbed by the battalion’s presence. In a calm voice, the sergeant informed Cooke that Dr. Foster had been captured, and then, he delivered an intriguing message from the local garrison commander, Antonio Comaduran. The garrison commander informed Cooke that the presence
of his soldiers was causing great alarm as rumors of an attack swirled. Comaduran hoped to
avoid a clash, but he was under strict orders to prevent the Americans from entering Tucson.
However, as a concession, the garrison commander was willing to allow the battalion to bypass
the village on either side without fear of an attack.

    Cooke responded by politely requesting Foster’s return and offered his assurances that he
wished neither to “molest” the garrison, nor harm the people of Tucson. He wished to assure
“the people that we are not their enemies, but friends, who wanted to purchase flour, &c. of
them.”79 But he would not bypass the town.

    Leaving the distillery on December 15, Cooke slowly advanced his increasingly nervous
troops toward Tucson. Throughout the day, he and Comaduran exchanged politely worded
messages, and prisoners, but neither appeared willing to make the concessions necessary to avoid
bloodshed. When Dr. Foster suddenly appeared in camp that evening, Cooke sensed he had
gained an advantage. Foster brought with him two Mexican officers, one of whom carried a
commission from Camanduran to negotiate an armistice. According to the negotiator,
Comaduran was willing to make a few more concessions in hopes of avoiding a battle. The
Americans could have access to the village, but Cooke had to agree to restrict their movements
to designated areas.

    Rather than accede to Comaduran, Cooke dictated defiant terms to his Mexican
counterpart. Asserting that he and his men fully intended to enter the village “for the purposes of
trade and refreshment,” Cooke warned Comaduran not to attack his soldiers. Next Cooke
declared that “in token of submission,” Camanduran “should surrender two cavalry carbines and
three lances.”80
Near dawn the following morning, Cooke learned his heavy-handed terms had been rejected by Comaduran. Undeterred by the news, Cooke advanced his command to within six miles of the village where he halted briefly and ordered his volunteers to load their weapons. Then, as the Mormons prepared to advance, Cooke spotted two riders approaching the battalion and countermanded his order. During the night, Comaduran had abandoned the village and most of Tucson’s population had fled in his wake. There would be no battle. 81

Pulled back from the brink, the battalion entered Tucson and observed scenes reminiscent of more joyous periods in their lives. As Henry Bigler recorded, “It looked good to see young green wheat patches and fruit trees and to see hogs and fowls running about and it was music to our ears to hear the crowing of cocks.” 82 Cooke, however, remained committed to his assertions that he only wished to obtain a supply of flour before continuing his expeditions. After establishing the battalion’s camp near a canal on the extreme western limits of the village, he seized the public grain stores and set a detachment to the task of milling flour. Cooke also directed other volunteers to load pack saddles with wheat to feed the battalion’s livestock. 83 Although tempted to lure Comaduran into a fight, Cooke remained close to Tucson over the next day and a half, and only ventured from its rude adobe structures long enough to conduct a brief reconnaissance of the area. He had sincerely hoped his arrival in Tucson would have been greeted more favorably, and he regretted the need of taking the town by force. In fact, before his departure on December 18, Cooke wrote letters to the garrison commander and Governor Don Manuel Gandara of Senora restating his reasons for occupying the pueblo and offering his assurances that none of the public property had been wasted. 84

Traveling on a northwesterly course toward the Santa Cruz Mountains, Cooke left Tucson with little information regarding his march save the road his command needed to follow
to the Gila. A group of Pima Indians encountered on the outskirts of the pueblo advised him to take a different route to their villages than the one taken by Kearny, and directed him toward a sun-baked clay road that stretched beyond the mountains. Warned that there would be few opportunities for water during the expected seventy-mile trek, the Indians assured Cooke the road would be shorter and more direct. As disturbing as the reports were, Cooke was reassured by the willingness of the Indians to serve as guides for the duration of the march. Little did he realize the battalion was beginning a three-day journey that would rival the crossing made a month earlier between Cooke’s Range and the Animas Mountains.

At the suggestion of his scouts, Cooke altered the battalion’s normal marching routine. In spite of the season, the temperatures were almost summer-like, and given the probable lack of water, Cooke already determined to alter his normal marching routine to take advantage of cooler temperatures in the late afternoon. After only four miles, Cooke stopped the battalion at the first water source pointed out by the Pima guides. Then after an additional three miles, he ordered another lengthy stop at the next water. When the march resumed, Cooke pushed the battalion through the Arizona desert until nine o’clock. Although occasionally slowed by mesquite thickets and deep sands, the road followed by the battalion allowed for rapid progress, and to the relief of all, water appeared at the intervals suggested by the Indian guides. During the second day of the march, however, the battalion suffered greatly.

Moving out at their normal hour, the battalion forged ahead under a blindingly bright sun that pushed temperatures to levels that reminded several of summer back in the Midwest. Informed of the scarcity of water along the trail ahead, battalion members were encouraged to conserve their water, but the dust and the heat drove them to empty their canteens with little thought of whether or not their scouts would find water. Water, however, eluded the battalion’s
scouts, and as the day drug on, men and draft animals faltered along the road. Soon the air surrounding the column filled with the groans of exhausted men and failing animals. When Captain Hunter complained of the mules braying ceaselessly to voice their suffering, Cooke responded, “I don’t care a damn about the mules, the men are what I’m thinking of.”

By the afternoon, Cooke realized the impossibility of holding his command together, and uncharacteristically broke from his rigid standards of march discipline. Gathering his company commanders near dusk, he declared he would not establish camp that evening. Instead, he gave the companies permission “to stop as long as they pleased, provided it was not over six hours.” Those who could continue the march did so. Those who could not stopped where their legs quit them. Before long, the battalion was scattered over six miles along the sun-baked clay road, which prompted Dr. Sanderson to make a frightening observation: “If our enemy had known it Fifty of them could have cut us up.” Cooke, however, pushed on with the leading elements of the battalion and did not stop until after one o’clock in the morning.

At 5:00 a.m., Cooke climbed back in the saddle and wearily forged ahead of his scattered command. Passing word to the company commanders, he directed his captains to resume their marches as their particular circumstances permitted. If necessary, the officers had permission to abandon their wagons to ensure the survival of their mules once the next water was located. Once the animals were watered, they could be driven along the back trail to retrieve their wagons. Fortunately, near midday, Leroux sent word that he had found two pools of rainwater only a few miles in advance. Cooke immediately dispatched a squad of soldiers to guard the pools to prevent them from being fouled by either his thirsty volunteers or their livestock. When Cooke finally encamped a few hours later at another pool of rain water, he calculated that he had
been in the saddle for thirty two of the previous fifty-two hours, during which time the battalion had marched sixty-two miles.\textsuperscript{88}

In the early afternoon of December 21, the volunteers emerged from a gap between two shallow mountains and came into view of “the long-sought Gila.” Following the westerly arch of the road, Cooke noted that his course soon intersected the trail made by Kearny’s dragoons. In the distance, on the opposite side of the river, Cooke also noticed the first Pima village. To his delight, the Indians did not hide from the American soldiers. In fact, after the battalion exited the Gila, several hundred Pima villagers were already present with “small sacks of corn, flour, beans, &c.,” and were eager to trade.\textsuperscript{89}

Without exception, the march from Tucson to the Gila River represented the most difficult passage endured by the battalion. Filled with little more than sand, gravel, and a few desert plants, Cooke declared the region “the most extensive desert I have seen.”\textsuperscript{90} But as he arose on December 22, the trial endured by his command seemed like a distant memory. Surrounded by cottonwood groves and fields of corn, wheat, melons, and squash, Cooke looked upon their arrival among the Pima as if his command had entered Eden.\textsuperscript{91} Furthermore, their hosts seemed as blessed as their lands. The Pima were universally praised by battalion members as handsome and industrious, and all were charmed by their child-like curiosities, innocence, and the ease with which they smiled. In fact, after Cooke saw a beautiful little girl who reminded him of his youngest daughter, the hard-bitten soldier stopped and tied a red silk handkerchief around the child’s head like “a turban.” Seeing the joy the simple gesture brought, Cooke mused, “if perfect happiness ever momentarily dwells on earth, it seemed that it was with her.”\textsuperscript{92}

Yet, Cooke was most impressed by the displays of honesty and loyalty shown by the Pima prior to the battalion’s arrival in their villages. Cooke learned that the Pima had resisted
tremendous pressures from Mexican military authorities in Tucson to surrender several valuable articles left by General Kearny—including dispatches, mules, and a pack of trade goods. Refusing to comply, the Pima’s elderly chief declared his people would not betray the trust of their American friends, and if necessary, they would “resist force with force.” It was an endearing moment for Cooke, and he began to see the Pima in terms best annunciated by their chief: “He said I would see that they were poor and naked, but they were content to live here by hard work on the spot which God had given them, and not like others, to rob and steal.” Aware that the members of his command belonged to a community searching for a home, Cooke suggested the Mormons consider the Gila as a possible location for the settlement of their church.93

For the weary battalion members, their time among the Pima was an especially welcomed change. As the battalion moved leisurely among the villages stretching some twenty-five miles along the Gila, the volunteers welcomed the villagers into their camps in hopes of purchasing food to add to their rations. Cooke thought the Indians would be disappointed with the Mormons’ few meager offerings, but to his surprise, each day a lively exchange developed. The Pima gladly traded their beans, watermelons, and corn cakes for whatever needles, thimbles, buttons, beads or old clothes the Mormons produced. The resulting scene reminded Cooke of “a crowded New Orleans market in numbers and sounds.”94

Unfortunately, on December 23, the realities of the war intruded on the pleasant setting. Moving the battalion fifteen miles downstream to the village of the neighboring Maricopa Indians, Cooke intercepted three scouts sent from General Kearny. According to the general’s dispatches, he had reached San Diego but the fate of California was far from certain. The Californios were in a state of insurrection, and the general urged Cooke to move with all haste.
Sensing there might still be an opportunity to join in the conquest of California, Cooke immediately ordered his company commanders to prepare to move out and his quartermasters to inventory the battalion’s commissary stores and equipment.

As had been done throughout the expedition, the companies consolidated their equipment to lighten the battalion’s wagons before resuming the expedition. Fortunately, the quartermasters were able to trade much of the excess materials for an additional six bushels of corn. When combined with the approximately eighty bushels of corn and nearly six hundred pounds of flour and corn meal already purchased, the additional grain gave the battalion a total of thirty-three days rations at issues of ten ounces per man per day. Cooke also estimated that he had about forty days worth meat rations (salt pork, beef, and mutton) at issues of two pounds. And while his quartermasters were largely unable to acquire additional mules, the Maricopa turned over another eight mules abandoned by Kearny, some of which were thought to be “in pretty good order.”

At 10:45 a.m. on Christmas Day, the Mormon Battalion moved out of the Maricopa village and made its way toward the Gila. Cooke, however, did not plan to follow the river for long. Believing time to be of the essence, he again determined to deviate from Kearny’s trail. Rather than follow the great bend of the Gila to its intersection with the Colorado River, Cooke planned to shave time and distance by cutting across the horseshoe bend of the river and follow a detour suggested by his guide Pauline Weaver. It was a decision he almost immediately regretted.

After passing through the rough mountain gap that marked the start of Weaver’s cutoff, the battalion struggled for nearly ten hours to push their wagons eighteen miles through deep sands and mesquite thickets. Reflecting his frustrations, Cooke declared the road was “bad,
sandy, and up hill.” When the battalion’s course returned to the Gila the following evening, Cooke’s sentiments did not change. In his estimation the trail entered “a wretched, uneven, and tangled bottom.” Adding to the miseries of the march, minerals from the aptly named Salt River flowed into the Gila in such concentrations that its waters were undrinkable for several miles below the junction of the two rivers. Moreover, the ground was often so saturated with salt that grass would not grow along the road, which meant the battalion’s livestock had to be driven to pastures from the battalion’s evening camps. “This is certainly the most desert, uncouth, and impracticable country and river of our knowledge,” recorded Cooke.96

On December 28, after another guide sent from Kearny found the battalion, Cooke learned of the engagement fought by the general outside San Diego in the San Pasqual Valley. Alarmed by the report, Cooke entertained the idea of dividing his command and rushing to the general’s aid, but after “maturely” considering his situation, he decided against the idea. Not only were other American forces closer to Kearny’s position, the battalion commander realized his soldiers could not survive the rugged forced marches—nor would his livestock. Subsisting on scant grass, mesquite, and a few pints of corn each day, the battalion’s mules were weakening, and the other animals appeared to be starving. Fortunately, the dispatches also notified the battalion commander that Kearny had about two hundred mules and beef cattle about half a day’s travel from Warner’s Ranch.

Immediately seized with hope, Cooke ordered Leroux, Charbonneau, and three other guides to find Kearny and bring back fresh mules and beeves. Cooke also notified his scouts that they if they encountered any “mules or horses coming out of California without a passport,” they had his permission to seize the animals and immediately return to the battalion.97
Since departing the Pima villages, Cooke grew increasing concerned for the health of his draft animals. On the last day of the year, battalion guards found four mules and several sheep dead. Cooke suspected the animals had eaten a poisonous plant, but could not be certain that they had not died of exhaustion. Faced with the devastating possibility of losing his draft animals, the battalion commander made a radical decision. In order to ease the strains on his weakest draft animals, Cooke decided to abandon several wagons and float most of the battalion’s baggage down the Gila in the two pontoon wagons acquired from Captain Burgwin in October. When the battalion returned to the river on January 1, 1847, the lieutenant colonel ordered the axles removed from the pontoons wagons, and then had the two wagon boxes lashed end to end. To maximize buoyancy Cooke had dry cottonwood trees tied to each side of the raft. Then, after a few trials to ensure the craft would float, it was loaded with nearly 2,500 pounds of supplies and equipment: thirteen days rations of salt pork, eighteen days worth of flour, approximately eight hundred pounds of corn, some of the road tools, and part of Cooke’s personal baggage.98

Assigning the craft to Lieutenant Stoneman, Cooke confidently launched the boat on January 2. His volunteers, however, did not share his enthusiasm. As the food carried on the barge constituted most of their remaining ration, they did not embrace their commanding officer’s willingness to risk their provisions. Unfortunately, the enlisted men’s fears proved well-founded. On January 5, as the battalion neared the mouth of the Gila River, Cooke learned his experiment had failed. The craft’s excessive weight made it susceptible to sandbars in the river’s shallow stream, and its crew had few alternatives but to deposit the cargo along the river. When Cooke received the news, he flew into a rage, directing his fury at “Commodore” Stoneman.99 Venting to his journal, Cooke fumed: “I had put in but three days’ rations of flour,
until in the last hour his [Stoneman’s] assurances induced me to add three more.” Disappointed, Cooke dispatched a detail to recover portions of the marooned flour and continue with the balance of the command. 100

As Cooke tried to push the results of the rafting disaster from his mind, the battalion continued to struggle against endless obstacles along the Gila. Fortunately, almost mercifully, by January 9, the battalion reached the base of Devil’s Point, and arrived at the Colorado River where Kearny’s dragoons crossed weeks earlier. While never an easy undertaking, Cooke dreaded supervising his inexperienced volunteers as they forded the turbulent mile-wide channel. His men were weak and malnourished. Most lacked proper footwear, or were barefooted, and few possessed more than a blanket to keep them warm. 101 Cooke regretted the pitiful state of his command, but there was little he could do to ease their miseries. 102 The river had to be crossed, and characteristically, Cooke would drive the Mormons with no outward projection of his true feelings.

Beginning with reveille on January 10, Cooke dispatched Lieutenant Stoneman to the western bank of the river with a pioneer crew to cut a road for the wagons to follow. Once the pontoons arrived at the staging area, he ordered the wagons emptied and directed the battalion members to ferry their equipment across the river in the pontoon raft by companies. The only items to be left were the empty wagons, mules, and teamsters, and they were to ford the river once all else was secured on the opposite bank. Initially, the operation went smoothly. The battalion commander even found time to make jokes at the expense of a few inexperienced river pilots. After one crew lost control of the pontoon, Cooke waved and shouted, “Good bye, gentlemen! When you get down to the Gulf of California, give my respects to the folks!” 103
After sunset, Cooke left orders for the morning guard to ferry the battalion’s 130 sheep and ten beeves across the river at reveille. Expecting the volunteers to work through the night, he ended his day confident that “one load over after daylight will probably complete it.” When he awoke on January 11, however, he was incensed by what he saw. During the night, several companies failed to transfer their baggage and wagons across the river, and no one bothered to cross the livestock. Charging past his adjutant, who was desperately trying to explain matters, Cooke roared orders sending his idled command scurrying. The companies still on the east bank of the river were immediately to load their wagons and cross the river. At 7:00, Cooke ordered the crew to transport the sheep, and then abandon the pontoons.

With matters well in hand on the east bank, Cooke crossed the river at 9:00 and discovered his troops on the western bank were equally derelict in their duties. In his journal, he noted: “Here, in high willows which concealed everything, I found everything doubly confused; tents standing, every man doing what suited [him]—some eating, some cooking . . . . I hurried all.” Declaring his intentions to leave the river by 11:00, the battalion commander bellowed orders at his lounging volunteers to load their wagons and prepare to march. The operations progressed smoothly until 10:00, when a lieutenant from C Company anxiously informed the lieutenant colonel that one of his wagons had become stuck in the river. Without hesitation, Cooke brusquely informed the man that he intended to move out within the hour. He would send them no assistance, nor would he delay his plans. According to the general’s dispatches, beyond the Colorado the battalion faced nearly eighty miles of desert and the only possibilities for water were from a series of wells dug by the dragoons. The first well was fifteen miles beyond the river, and he intended to reach it by dusk. He would accept no delays. At the
designated hour, with C Company still struggling to extricate its wagon, Cooke gave the order for the battalion to resume its march.

By late afternoon, the battalion reached the first well. As Cooke approached, however, he received a report that it held “not a drop of water.” Shaken by the news, the battalion commander worried for his command. The next water was sixty miles and five days away, and according to his scouts, there was “scarce a hope” of making the journey without water. When Cooke finally reached the well, he saw Lieutenant Oman and a detail feverishly digging in hopes of striking water. A short distance away, another crew had started a second well.

To Cooke’s great relief, Oman shortly emerged from the well and announced water had started to seep into the well. The sides of the well, however, were too unstable. With each shovel of debris removed, the walls collapsed and smothered the seeping water. A member of Oman’s pioneer party suggested well could be stabilized with the use of a washtub that belonged to the wife of one company captains. Yet, to Cooke’s “utter astonishment,” the captain’s lady was “unwilling to give up that valuable article.” Convinced that the lives of every member of the battalion hung in the balance, Cooke ordered the tub seized. An hour after knocking the bottom out of the prized vessel, water flowed freely into the well. Then, further relieving Cooke’s anxiety, shouts were heard from the second well that water had been struck. Impressed with the abilities of the lieutenant, Cooke dispatched Oman and a detail of twelve armed men to the next well. As Cooke concluded his journal entry for the day, he wrote a very telling passage: “Eighteen hour of increasing labor has been my lot to-day, of anxiety, enough to turn one gray.”

Cooke’s anxieties, however, were not at an end. Owing to the slow rate of replenishment with which the water seeped into the wells, the battalion commander decided to stagger the
marching order of the individual companies. Over the next several days, Oman’s detail stayed half a day ahead of the battalion to prepare the next well. In their wake, Lieutenant Smith and a crew of pioneers marked the road for the battalion to follow. Once the mules were watered, Cooke followed with the battalion. As had become his custom, before departing the first well, Cooke inventoried the battalion’s supplies and inspected the equipment to ensure that neither his volunteers, nor his draft animals were burdened any more than necessary. He ordered each company to consolidate its equipment and abandon excess wagons. The result was that the battalion left the first well on January 12, with only seven government wagons. A day later, he reduced that number to five. It was a solemn statement regarding the attrition of expedition.  

By January 15, the battalion reached the last of Kearny’s wells at Pozo Hondo, near modern El Centro, California. As Cooke neared their destination, the presence of thirty three mules and ten beeves told him that his guides had found Kearny’s livestock herd. But his relief was brief. The well was no longer producing sufficient water. Equally distressing, scouts from Kearny delivered dispatches informing Cooke of the damage inflicted on Kearny’s dragoons at the Battle of San Pasqual. Mexican lancers killed twenty three officers and enlisted men, many of whom had served with him for nearly a decade. It was a hard blow, especially in light of the fact that he believed he should have been with Kearny—with K Company—during the battle.  

As it was only 10:30 in the morning, Cooke ordered his command to rest for an hour and a half, and then resume their march. Since there was little water, the battalion commander wanted to take advantage of the cool morning temperatures and push his troops as far as he could before halting during the heat of the day. Then, when the battalion halted during the afternoon, Cooke ordered one of the new fat beeves butchered and fed his thirsty volunteers. Then, at dusk, he ordered the march resumed. Yet, the new mules were “as wild as tigers,” and hours were lost
trying to harness the brutes. When the battalion finally moved out, Cooke pushed it ten miles and did not pause until midnight. Cooke, however, had no plans to establish camp. After a brief halt, he again ordered the battalion to move out. In light of the dispatches received that afternoon, Cooke believed it imperative to reach San Diego as soon as possible in order to reinforce Kearny and the other American forces. Yet, without the sun, the temperature dropped so severely that Cooke noted that it was too cold to ride his mule. Adding to the battalion’s difficulties, the scouts ignored Cooke’s orders not to let the lead wagon escape their view, and the battalion became lost. Soon teams failed—even those employing new mules—and Cooke had to halt the battalion to trade out the spent animals. Fortunately, the guides found the battalion and righted their course.

When the sun came up, the exhausted volunteers briefly rejoiced in its warmth, but within hours, its rays transformed the cool morning into a blistering inferno. To the delight of all, however, by 11:00 a.m. on the morning of January 16, the lead wagons sited the Carrizo River. In his journal, the battalion commander noted that his command had marched an endurance shattering fifty-six miles in forty-eight hours. It had been seventy two hours since his livestock had been watered, and in that time, sixteen mules were lost to exhaustion. To celebrate their accomplishment, Cooke ordered enough cattle butchered to provide each man in the battalion two and a half pounds of beef.107

The Mormon Battalion was a mere ten days away from their final destination. Although inclined to rest his soldiers, Cooke discovered that there was insufficient grass along the stream, and he reluctantly pushed on the following day. Greatly reduced from when it started, the battalion marched with only eight wagons—five government and three civilian wagons. Of the thirty eight beeves that began the march in Santa Fe, there were four left. When combined with
the cattle recently delivered, and the remaining eighty eight sheep, the battalion commander increased rations to two and a half pounds of meat. The hardships of the march, however, had transformed the battalion beyond the tallies of an inventory sheet. Through their shared experiences, the Mormon volunteers and their flinty commanding officer had grown to respect one another. In spite of their early resistance to his regulations, the volunteers had followed Cooke unquestioningly and executed his orders to the best of their abilities. These were the qualities of soldiers. As a demonstration of the respect they had earned from their commanding officer, on January 19, Cooke uncharacteristically picked up a pick and began hewing away the rock from an outcropping that blocked the path of the battalion’s wagons. In an age when officers did not labor, no greater demonstration of respect could have been performed by Cooke.\(^{108}\)

On January 21, with Charbonneau again leading their way, the battalion entered the verdant San Jose Valley and arrived at Warner’s Ranch. Belonging to an American named Jonathan Warner, who had relocated to California in the 1830, the ranch was a kingdom spanning nearly forty-eight thousand acres. Although the ranch’s proprietor had little more than hospitality to offer his guests, the volunteers rejoiced at their arrival all the same. The Mormon volunteers viewed the ranch as a paradise, and after establishing their camp, they filled the air with singing voices and music from a fiddle that had survived the trek. While aware that they still had several arduous days of travel before them, they knew the toughest aspects of their journey were over. The nights would continue to be cold, but the days would be warm and there would be plenty of food and water.\(^{109}\)

After leaving Warner’s Ranch, Cooke considered leading the battalion to Los Angeles as a “military propriety.” Although his original orders directed him to San Diego, Cooke
considered them to have been written “at a time when it was impossible to know the wants of the service, the circumstances of the country, &c.” The dispatches he received during the previous several days, however, led him to believe that the opportunity to lead his troops into battle still existed. The enemy’s forces were concentrated in the seaside pueblo of Los Angeles, where they were under siege from Kearny’s forces in the south and Lieutenant Colonel John C. Frémont from the north. It seemed only logical that Cooke should lead his force into Los Angeles and complete the envelopment of the pueblo by taking a position that would block off any chance of escape to the east. As the battalion wound its way to the coast, Cooke initiated drills to familiarize his soldiers with the commands and formations they might execute during a fight.

On January 25, however, Cooke learned that combat operations in California were finished. An armistice had been signed on January 13, between the leaders of the California insurrectionists and Frémont. The battalion was directed to San Diego per their original orders.¹¹⁰

By January 27, the battalion had passed through the maze of coastal mountain ranges that stood as the final barrier to their ultimate destination. As the day ended, the battalion entered the San Luis Valley and caught its first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean. It was a spectacular site. The land was “carpeted over with green grass and wild oats and any amount of wild mustard and white clover, and nearly trembled beneath the treading hooves of innumerable cattle, horses, mules, and jackasses.” Yet it was the image of the setting sun that captured the imagination of every man in the column. “The joy, the cheer that filled our souls,” recalled Daniel Tyler, “[were sensations] none but worn-out pilgrims nearing a haven of rest can imagine.” After passing the abandoned Mission of San Luis Ray, the battalion descended into the valley and
encamped at a deserted ranch named the Agua Hedionda—where the volunteers were lulled to sleep by the sound of crashing wave.

Ordered to lead the battalion to the Mission of San Diego, approximately five miles from the portside pueblo of the same name, the battalion made its way into the Solidad Valley on January 29. Befitting the character of the expedition, the terrain over the last sixteen miles was saturated with rain, and led the volunteers through deeply rutted, mud soaked passages that were nearly too steep to climb with the battalion wagons. For once, Cooke considered it good fortune for the battalion to be so undersupplied. When the battalion finally entered the mission grounds, they discovered its buildings were dilapidated and infested with a variety of pests and vermin.

Near dusk, Cooke ordered the battalion to establish its camp on a broad flat below the mission grounds. The men did not mind. Their campsite was surrounded by blooming date and olive trees, gardens and vineyards, and wells with fresh water. Moreover, it offered the Mormons a stunning view of San Diego’s harbor.111

Cooke, however, did not remain with the battalion. His orders directed him to report to General Kearny’s headquarters. Although combat operations were at an end, there were other pressing matters to which the battalion commander needed to be appraised. In his absence, though, Cooke wished to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the battalion in its efforts to accomplish their history-making expedition.

Headquarters Mormon Battalion,  
Mission of San Diego  
January 30, 1847

The Lieutenant-colonel commanding congratulates the battalion on their safe arrival on the shore of the Pacific ocean, and the conclusion of the march over two thousand miles.

History may be searched in vain for an equal march of infantry. Nine-tenths of it has been through a wilderness where nothing but savages and wild beasts are found, or deserts where, from want of water, there is no living creature. There, with almost hopeless labor, we have dug deep
wells, which the future traveler will enjoy. Without a guide who had traversed them, we have ventured into trackless prairies where water was not found for several marches. With crowbar and pick and axe in hand, we have worked our way over mountains which seemed to defy ought to save the wild goat, and hewed a passage through a chasm of living rock more narrow than our wagons. To bring these first wagons to the Pacific, we have preserved the strength of our mules by herding them ever over large tracts, which you have laboriously guarded without loss. The garrisons of four presidios of Sonora concentrated within the walls of Tucson [sic], gave us no pause. We drove them out with their artillery, but our intercourse with the citizens was unmarked by a single act of injustice. Thus, marching half-naked and half-fed, and living upon wild animals, we have discovered and made a road of great value to our country.

Arrived at the first settlement of California after a single day’s rest, you cheerfully turned off from the route to this point of promised repose, to enter upon a campaign, and meet, as we believed, the approach of the enemy, and this, too, without even salt to season your sole subsistence of fresh meat. . . .

Thus, volunteers, you have exhibited some high and essential qualities of veterans. But much remains undone. Soon you will turn you strict attention to the drill, to system and order, to forms, also, which are all necessary to soldiers.

By order of Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke:

P.C. Merrill, Adjutant.112

When the battalion’s adjutant finished reading Cooke’s testament to the heroic efforts of the battalion, the volunteers reacted by throwing their hats in the air and cheering wildly. It was, according to Daniel Tyler, the first time “our commander’s real sentiments towards the Battalion” were made known. Like nearly every member of the battalion, Tyler suspected Cooke’s stern character towards the volunteers throughout the expedition reflected a prejudice developed from the rumors about Mormons that were so prevalent in the East. The order, however, served as a clear indication of Cooke’s desire to do justice to the Mormon volunteers.113

To men like Sergeant William Coray and Privates David Pettigrew and Levi Hancock, Cooke’s words of praise rang hollow. Since leaving Santa Fe, their dislike of the battalion
commander had festered into the purest hate. Only days earlier Hancock declared, “The Devil I believe would hate his oppression towards any body and would let him have no authority of any body. . .”\(^{114}\) Yet, most in the battalion shared the sentiments of John J. Riser, who began to view Cooke’s stern treatment of the volunteers in a different light after reaching the Pacific. After hearing Cooke’s words, Riser reflected: “Had it not been for the cool headedness and sagacity of our stern commander, . . . we must have all perished before reaching our destination. There is no doubt in my mind but what Colonel Cooke was one of the ablest officers then in the Army . . .”\(^{115}\)

Although Cooke’s assertions that the battalion had completed a march without equal in the annals of military history were not true, the march was nonetheless a spectacular accomplishment. The road they established became one of the most significant thoroughfares of the nineteenth century: Cooke’s Wagon Road. In only a few years, Cooke’s Wagon Road served as a critical link between East and West once word spread of the discovery of gold in the American River in 1848. By providing a well marked passage for emigrants struck with gold fever, Cooke’s Wagon Road allowed thousands to make the overland journey to the goldfields by a southern route. Five years later, in 1853, the crude map made by Cooke of the expedition’s march was used to justify the Gadsden Purchase, which expanded the territorial footprint of the nation to its present boundaries and made possible the establishment of a southern transcontinental railroad route later in the century. Cooke’s Wagon Road also became a vital artery for the Butterfield Stage Line to follow during its years of operation.\(^{116}\)

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1 Per Kearny’s orders, Cooke would not officially assume the rank of lieutenant colonel of volunteers until he assumed command of the Mormon Battalion. For sake of simplicity, however, the author will refer to Cooke by his volunteer rank throughout the chapter.

2 On October 20, Cooke angrily recorded in his journal that “I have but twenty-eight beeves, ten less than the number I made every effort to get of the commissary at Santa Fé.” See Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 3.

3 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 2-3.
In fact the army’s financial difficulties became so difficult that Cooke rescinded an order from Kearny to form an escort of eighty mounted volunteers because he could not purchase mules for the volunteers. Philip St. George Cooke, “Journal of the march of the Mormon battalion of infantry volunteers, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel P. St. Geo. Cooke, (also captain of dragoons,) from Santa Fe, New Mexico to Sand Diego, California, kept by himself by direction of the commanding general of the army of the west. Senate Executive Document, no. 2, 31st Congress, Special Session (Washington, D.C.: Union Office, 1849): 2. Hereafter cited as Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal. Also see, Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 83-84.

8 Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 62-63 and Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 165
9 Although the battalion would be properly outfitted with the necessary arms and equipment at Fort Leavenworth following its arrival in early August, the volunteers declined the offer of federal uniforms. Instead, they opted to receive a clothing allowance of $42 per man. The volunteers reasoned that since there were no regulations demanding the battalion members wear uniforms, they could donate a portion of the clothing allowance they received to meet the need of their church. Another factor that contributed to the unmilitary appearance of the battalion was the fact that during their two-week stay at Fort Leavenworth, the battalion had little time to learn the skills soldiers normally acquire through hours of drill. The need to secure supplies, draw rations, pack wagons, break livestock, and to fire their weapons, meant that the battalion members had little time to learn more than the basic evolutions of drill before departing on their journey to New Mexico. See Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 145-47 and 152-56, Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 35-41, and Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 136-37. Also, in reference to the weapons issued the battalion, the Mormon volunteers carried a number of different firearms: the Model 1816 smoothbore flintlock, the 1817 Common Flintlock, and the Model 1841 percussion lock, “Mississippi Rifle” or jäger. For additional details, see Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 152-154.

7 Lieutenant Andrew Jackson Smith and Lieutenant George P. Dykes are two of the most despised characters in the history of the Mormon Battalion. The hatred of Smith stemmed from his cruel and unsympathetic treatment of the Mormons following his assumption of command on August 29, 1846. Reports from battalion members state that Smith drove the weary volunteers on exhausting marches that resulted in the physical destruction of not only the battalion members, but the command’s livestock. Smith caused more hard feelings within the battalion by ordering the sick to accept medical treatment from the battalion’s surgeon, Dr. George Sanderson, over objections that such medical treatments violated Mormon doctrines against consumption of mineral medicines. In fact, it was Smith’s inflexibility on the subject of the battalion’s sick that nearly triggered an assault by one of the battalion members. Ultimately, Smith decreed that if the sick refused medical treatment they would not be permitted to ride in wagons. On September 2, after discovering a wagon full of sick volunteers who had refused treatment, Smith ordered the men to exit the wagon and resume their march. The wagon’s driver, Sergeant Thomas S. Williams, informed Smith that the wagon was privately owned, and therefore, the lieutenant had no authority to dictate who rode in it. When the exchange became heated, Smith reportedly reached for his sword and threatened to run Williams through if the sergeant did not desist. Williams responded by raising his whip and threatening to “strike him [Smith] to the ground if he took a step forward” to remove the sick men from the wagon. See Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 144-50 and 175; Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 49-50, and 57-62; and Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 174-190. It should be noted that in his superb history of the battalion, Sherman Fleek states his belief that the incident between Smith and Williams was a fabrication created by Daniel Tyler. See Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 184.

8 Battalion adjutant Lieutenant George P. Dykes was an equally controversial figure in the history of the Mormon Battalion—primarily due to the fact that, in spite of his membership in the LDS church, Dykes repeatedly placed his obligations as a soldier before his religious obligations. See Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 174-78; Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 48; and Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 143-44. In regards to the near mutinies, see Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 167-69, 204-07; and Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 56 and 60.

9 Young established the idea within the battalion when he charged those selected as officers and noncommissioned officers to be as “fathers to the privates.” In addition to their martial obligations, these men were to ensure the enlisted members of the battalion did not stray from their faith by neglecting their prayers, swearing, stealing, or gambling. If the men were “faithful in keeping the Commandments of God,” and fulfilled their spiritual obligations, Young prophesized “not a man shall fall by an enemy.” Thus Young established the idea that if the men violated their religious obligations, their lives would be at stake because they would be violating the will of God. See Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 128-29, and Fleek, History May Be Search in Vain, 140-41. Also see

286

10 Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 67.
11 Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 136-39. Also see Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 2.
12 Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 135-40.
17 Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 115.
18 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 2.
19 The order reducing the amount of kitchen equipment was issued as part of General Order 8. The order is reproduced in Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 167.
20 Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 91.
21 While he had secured road-building tools, and enough salt, flour, sugar, and coffee to make the estimated sixty-day march, he still needed to make arrangement to purchase additional food supplies and replacement mules during the battalion’s trek through the Rio Grande Valley. The lieutenant colonel also needed to hire guides familiar with the region who could find water and set a course that would accommodate the expedition’s wagons. Although Cooke had maps of the region, he knew they were utterly unreliable. On November 20, Cooke vented his frustrations with the maps he carried, stating: “I discover that the maps are worthless; they can be depended on for nothing. Mitchell’s and Tanner’s, both published this year, disagree two degrees of longitude in the relative position of Santa Fé and San Diego.” Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 20-21.
22 Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 192.
23 There is a discrepancy regarding the number of wagons with which the battalion had when leaving Santa Fe. In his official journal of the expedition, Cooke lists approximately 30: “There are three mule-wagons to each company, beside six large ox-wagons; also, four other mule wagons for the field and staff, quartermaster’s property, hospital department, and the paymaster; and there are four or five private wagons.” Cooke’s calculations disagree significantly from the number given by Ricketts, which are: 25 government wagons; 15 mule wagons, 3 mule wagons for each company for company supplies, each pulled by 8 mules; 6 large ox wagons for heavy equipment; 4 mule wagons for the battalion command (field and staff, quartermaster, hospital department, paymaster); 5 company wagons, purchased by the men to haul their equipment so they wouldn’t have to carry such heavy loads; and 12 private wagons. See Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 2 and Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 71.
24 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 3.
25 Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 175-76.
26 As quoted in Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 72.
27 Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 177.
28 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 6.
29 On October 25, Cooke wrote: “I assembled the captains this morning at reveille, and earnestly exhorted them to lend me more efficient assistance in requiring the mules to be properly grazed and fed; or else the expedition must soon fall through. They made excellent promises.” See Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 97. The officer the volunteers failed to salute was Lieutenant Dykes, who shortly resigned his position as Cooke’s aide to escape the bitter criticisms of his fellow Mormons for being a Judas for taking his military obligations as seriously as his religious obligations. See Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 187.
30 Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 179.
31 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 8.
32 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 10.
33 Fleek History May Be Searched in Vain, 250-51.
34 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 4, 6-7, 99.
35 A typical full-ration consisted of one pound of flour, sugar, and coffee, plus two pounds of meat (either salt pork or beef) per man, per day. Following the reduction in rations on October 21, company messes were issued three-
fourths of a pound of flour, one and a half pounds of salt pork, and three-quarters ration of sugar and coffee per man each day. Cooke believed the reductions ensured the battalion members would have food for the duration of the expedition. Furthermore, by reserving his beef supply, he not only ensured his cattle would survive deeper into the march, he maintained a reserve of potential draft animals in case they were needed to pull wagons or carry equipment in pack saddles. See Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 4-9.

36 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 7-10, and Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 99. Also see Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 180.

37 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 5-6.

38 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 5.

39 While the thought of fresh meat was certainly appealing, battalion members generally felt like ghouls waiting for the animal’s demise. Private Levi Hancock composed a poem entitled “The Desert Route,” that revealed the sentiment: “And when an ox is like to die/The whole camp halts, and we lay by/The greedy wolves and buzzards stay/Expecting rations for the day.” Hancock’s poem is reprinted in Tyler, Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 182.

40 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 13 and 15.

41 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 10 and 12.

42 As quoted in Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 76-77.

43 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 14.

44 The second sick detachment under the command of Willis returned to Santa Fe on December 1, 1846. Requiring three days to rest and resupply, the sick detachment left the capital city and began an arduous trek to the Mormon camp at Pueblo on December 4. All but twelve of the Willis detachment arrived on December 20, 1846. See Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 263.

45 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 14-15. Cooke inventoried the excess supplies on the following day: 31 tents, 12 camp-kettles, 26 mess pans, and 149 tent poles. He sent the materials to Captain Burgwin’s command the following morning. Also see Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 80. Ricketts describes the new configuration of the tents as follows: “They set the breeches on the ground in front and rear of the tent and put a peg in the muzzle of the ridge pole. The back of the tents were split and a gore inserted. This gave the tents a low pyramidal shape, while making them more roomy. They were six inches lower, but slept nine instead of six.” Also see Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 203.

46 Cooke ordered the mules to carry packs filled with no more than eighty pounds of equipment and those loaded onto the oxen were to weigh no more than two hundred pounds. Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 14-15.

47 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 15.

48 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 16. Historians of the Mormon Battalion have given several locations for the point where Cooke left the Rio Grande Valley and began his march to the San Pedro River. Young gave the location as being near modern Rincon, New Mexico. See Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 197. Fleek cites the location as being south of modern Truth or Consequences, near Hatch, New Mexico. See Fleek, History May be Searched in Vain, 264.

49 As quoted in Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 80. Interestingly, Coray suggests that the members of the battalion were so angered by the separation that they were near mutiny. The only reason for their continued obedience was their fear that reprisals would be launched against the Church in the aftermath. Yet, these sentiments do not bear out by other Mormon diarists. Coray is the only diarist cited by Ricketts that makes such assertions. Tyler, a historian and member of the expedition, makes no claims of contemplated rebellion. In contrast, Fleek claims that it was near this time in the march that the battalion members began to trust Cooke and believe that he was equally concerned with their health and welfare as he was the successful termination of the expedition. See Fleek, History May be Searched in Vain, 269.

50 To honor the doctor’s discovery, the battalion members quickly dubbed the site Foster’s Hole. Carmen Smith, “The Lost Well of the Mormon Battalion Rediscovered,” Utah Historical Quarterly, 57(3) (Fall, 1989): 278-80. Also see, Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 16-17; Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 264-65; Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 80-81; and Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 197-98.

51 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 17.

52 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 16-20; Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 265-66; Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 197-200.
Comaduran’s troops, see Fleek, The Mormon Battalion, 86 and Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 201.

Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 209.


Cooke, The Conquest of New Mexico and California, 134-35.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 26-27; Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 135-36; and Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 88.

Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 88.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 27-30; Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 135-37; Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 210; Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 275-76; Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 88; and Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 204-06.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 32.

Cooke dispatched hunting parties because he earlier issued an order forbidding the volunteers to leave camp or fire their muskets at game. The men were also forbidden to load their muskets. See Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 214-15.

Bigler, “Extracts,” 47. Also see Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 207-08. Joining the battalion after an absence of several days was Private John Allen. Days before, as the battalion moved to cross the Guadalupe Mountains, Allen had simply disappeared, leaving most to believe he had deserted. If he had intended to desert, he quickly changed his mind after a group of Apache warriors robbed him of his rifle, equipment, and most of his clothing, and then, set him on his way. Accounting for his where-abouts, Allen asserted that after a harrowing trek through the mountains without food or water, and having had nothing to eat save the rotting flesh of a dead horse, he finally found the battalion’s trail and followed it to the San Bernardino Ranch. Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 140-41. Also see Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 210 and 213; Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 276; and Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 206-07.

On December 9, the day the battalion reached the San Pedro River, Cooke noted: “My animals obtain the gamma grass every night . . . it is of a straw color, and looks dead; but the mules have lately improved on it with short marches . . . .” See Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 36.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 37.

In all probability, Comaduran’s troops were a mixture of regulars and conscripts who were vastly outnumbered by Cooke’s battalion. Cooke’s scouts estimated that there were approximately 200 Mexican soldiers in Tucson prior to the battalions arrival, but Dr. Sanderson, who was also taken hostage by Comaduran’s patrols, put the number of troops at between 130 and 150. For a brief discussion of the probable skill, composition, and condition of Comaduran’s troops, see Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 281-90.

Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 280.


Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 34. Unfortunately, Cooke does not cite the source of this intelligence.
This point stands in contrasts with Young and Fleek’s account of Cooke’s advance toward Tucson. Both indicate that the likelihood of a battle was readily apparent from the moment he decided to march on the village. Yet his journal entries do not bear out such an interpretation. Although Cooke learned of the garrison’s presence on December 12, he did not learn of the garrison commander’s intentions to deny the battalion access to Tucson until December 14—fully two days after Cooke decided to march on the village. During the interim time period, Cooke proceeded with the understanding that Kearny had negotiated a treaty giving Americans access to Tucson (“Americans could pass anywhere…”).

During the interim time period, Cooke proceeded with the understanding that Kearny had negotiated a treaty giving Americans access to Tucson (“Americans could pass anywhere…”).  

As quoted in Ricketts, _The Mormon Battalion_, 100-101. Shocked by his commanding officer’s comments, Private William Coray noted, “It was the first humane word I had heard from him.”

As quoted in Fleek, _History May Be Searched in Vain_, 294.

According to Cooke’s journal, the gift of the handkerchief was not the only kindness he extended to the Pima. Before departing the village he wished to reward their kindness and “add to their comfort and welfare by introducing sheep among them.” The battalion commander then gave three ewes and several lambs to the Pima chief “for the ultimate use of his people.” These gestures by Cooke prompted Daniel Tyler to observe in his history of the battalion: “Kindness to natives, by military officers, as manifested in several instances by Colonel Cooke, is so rate in this age, that this circumstance may be mentioned, as one of the noteworthy events of our journey.” See Tyler, _A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion_, 235.

In a most reprehensible display, before the battalion pulled out of the Maricopa village, Cooke declared that he would not permit the volunteers to store privately purchased articles of food in the government’s wagons. All privately purchased food had to be carried in the civilian wagons. For men who considered themselves on the brink of starvation, the new decree was a severe blow to their morale. Many had, allegedly, bought their private rations by literally trading the shirts off their backs in order to end their hunger. As Daniel Tyler noted, “The result of this order was that a great deal of provisions was left on the ground by the starving men.” To the great relief of the enlisted men, company captains ignored the colonel’s directive and gathered as much of the contraband as they dared into their respective company wagons. See Tyler, _A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion_, 236, and Ricketts, _The Mormon Battalion_, 105.
Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 239. Also see Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 60, and Bigler, “Extracts,” 52. Eventually, a rescue party recovered most of the flour, but was unable to secure the rest of the stranded supplies. See Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 299.

Since departing Santa Fe nearly every battalion member had lost a quarter of their body weight. Nathan V. Jones, on January 5, 1847, wrote that several battalion members had a contest of sorts to see who had lost the most weight: “We had a weighing frolic. I weighed 128; weight when I enlisted, 198.” See Jones, “Journal,” 10.

In the wake of the rafting disaster, and despite his donation, Cooke had no choice but to restrict rations to nine ounces of flour or corn meal and 1¼ pounds of meat. The latter of which was suspected by many as being diseased. One volunteer, Henry Bigler, said the meat was “jelly-like,” and Daniel Tyler claimed Dr. Sanderson declared the meat to be “unwholesome.” In fact, Sanderson urged the volunteers to broil or fry their rations, instead of boiling it, lest they “die off like rotten sheep.” The battalion commander agreed, pronouncing it “scarcely fit to be eaten,” but he had nothing else to offer his soldiers. See Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 63-65; Bigler, “Extracts,” 53; and Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 238-39.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 69-72. Also see Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 244; Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 306-08; Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 219-21; and Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 111-12.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 72-73.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 76.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 78-80. Also see, Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 313, and Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 221-22.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 77 and 82.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 82-84. Also see Bigler, “Extracts,” 56; Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 252; Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 314-17; and Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 117-18.

Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 84-85.

Daniel Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 254-55. Also see Young, The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 222-23.

As quoted in Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 328.

As quoted in Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 121.

The moon barely stood above the mountains surrounding the dilapidated San Diego Mission when Lieutenant Colonel Cooke set off to meet with General Kearny on January 29, 1847. It had been a long day for the road weary officer, but as his skinny mule trudged along the coastal road toward the seaside pueblo of San Diego, Cooke was invigorated by his surroundings. It was a beautiful night. A light breeze blew in pleasantly from the coast, and due to the rains that had fallen so generously over the previous days, the countryside sparkled in silvery hues as it refracted the moonlight. Yet, it was the impending meeting with Kearny that bore the greatest responsibility for Cooke’s revitalization. It had been over four months since Cooke had seen his commanding officer, and he eagerly awaited the opportunity to report the success of his march. In particular, he wished to boast that he had not only constructed a wagon road connecting the Rio Grande with the Pacific Ocean, but had managed to bring wagons along the entire length of his new route while holding together the raw volunteers of the Mormon Battalion.¹

When Cooke arrived at the residence hosting the general, however, there was little discussion of the Mormon Battalion’s epic march or accomplishments. Instead of a pleasant reunion between old comrades, Kearny stunned his guest by revealing that California remained in a state of turmoil. Although the fighting had ended, a new threat had risen to take its place—one that not only jeopardized the United States’ hold on the territory, but promised the frightening possibility of civil war between American troops on the West Coast if not quickly resolved.
According to Kearny a mutiny had erupted following the defeat of the California insurrectionists a few weeks earlier. Commodore Robert F. Stockton, the commander of naval operations and acting territorial governor, had defied orders from the President of the United States appointing Kearny as territorial governor and commander-in-chief of all ground forces in California by refusing to surrender the governor’s office and by continuing to organize the territory’s civil government. Furthermore, as the commodore was planning to leave the territory, he had selected as his successor to the governorship an officer under Kearny’s command: Lieutenant Colonel John C. Frémont of the Mounted Rifles. Kearny tried to warn Stockton that unless he possessed orders giving him the authority to organize the territory’s civil government and appoint its officers, his actions were in defiance of the government’s will. The president, Kearny declared, had personally selected him to take charge of affairs in California. Stockton, however, ignored the warning and appointed Lieutenant Colonel Frémont as California’s governor on January 17.²

Rather than meet with Kearny to discuss the situation, Stockton responded with a letter that asserted the general had no authority to claim the governor’s office. The commodore had read Kearny’s orders and believed the general’s appointment as territorial governor was contingent upon Kearny leading the conquest of California. The Secretary of War’s orders, as Stockton pointed out, read: “Should you conquer and take possession of New Mexico and Upper California . . . you will establish temporary civil governments therein.” The conquest of California was a feat the commodore claimed he accomplished—not Kearny. After assuming command of the Pacific squadron from Commodore John D. Sloat in July, Stockton argued that he secured possession of the territory in August before Kearny left New Mexico. Therefore the authority to assume the governorship, to establish a civil government, and to appoint officers to
that government, as well as the power to name his successor were his by right of conquest. As a result, the commodore asserted that Kearny’s “instructions from the War Department, under these circumstances, should . . . be considered obsolete and nugatory.” Furthermore, Stockton would tolerate no challenges to his authority and suspended Kearny from command of all United States forces – save his escort of dragoons. The commodore also announced his intention to notify Washington of Kearny’s transgressions and have the general recalled.

Yet, Stockton’s defiance was only part of the mutiny reported by Kearny. The day after he and the commodore began exchanging letters asserting their authority in the newly won territory, Fremont ventured by the general’s quarters to inquire of the situation. During their conversation, the junior officer produced a letter declaring his refusal to recognize Kearny’s authority in California. Pointing out that Stockton had been functioning as military commander and territorial governor since the previous July, the explorer wrote: “until you and Commodore Stockton adjust between yourselves the question of rank . . . I shall have to report and receive orders, as heretofore, from the commodore.”

Fremont’s visit had been prompted by a set of orders from Kearny delivered earlier in the day. In an effort to derail Stockton’s plans, Kearny sent the Pathfinder orders demanding that “no change will be made in the organization of your battalion of volunteers, or officers appointed in it, without . . . sanction or approval being first obtained.” The order was unmistakable: Fremont could not accept the governorship without Kearny’s approval, and Kearny had no intention of giving it. Fremont, however, was guided more by his desires for fame and glory than his sense of duty. He was equally committed to Stockton’s agenda, and the ramifications of his decision were unmistakable. He not only intended to recognize Stockton as the supreme military authority in the territory, he intended to recognize the commodore as the supreme
political authority as well. He not only intended to accept Stockton’s appointment to the governor’s office, but would refuse to acknowledge Kearny’s authority as a brigadier general and commander of the Army of the West.\(^5\)

Kearny was stunned. Whereas, on some level, Commodore Stockton might have had grounds to contest Kearny’s claims, Fremont had none. Kearny’s orders regarding the scope of his military authority were undeniably clear. He had been given the authority to assume command of all ground forces in the theater, regular and volunteer, including those that “may be organized in California.” Frémont was a lieutenant colonel in the regular army, and was at that moment, in command of a volunteer battalion of California immigrants. Kearny understandably expected the support and cooperation of Frémont and the members of his California Battalion in the developing contest with Stockton. The Pathfinder’s declaration was nothing short of criminal.\(^6\)

Displaying incredible restraint and compassion, Kearny pleaded with Frémont to reconsider his actions and withdraw the letter before he ruined his career and reputation. The general informed the misguided explorer that he, as an officer in the U.S. Army, was bound to recognize Kearny’s authority as a superior officer. Reminding the explorer that he had been a longtime friend and ally of Senator Thomas Hart Benton, Frémont’s father-in-law, Kearny attempted to appeal to the young officer as a family friend. Kearny warned Fremont that the commodore had legal authority to neither establish a territorial government nor appoint its officers. Furthermore, as a naval officer, Stockton could not protect Frémont if he chose to disobey orders from a superior officer.\(^7\)

For a moment, Frémont seemed to pause in order to consider the general’s words. He then asked the general if there were any objections to appointing him governor—hinting that the
office would secure his loyalty. The general responded that he had no objections to a future appointment, but could not give any indication of when it might come. He intended to organize a territorial government, and as governor, would oversee its operations until his request to return to Missouri was granted by the War Department. Disappointed, Frémont declared that he wanted the governorship much sooner than Kearny was willing to offer. Yet, as if to offer some sort of concession to the general, Frémont announced that he would no longer follow the commodore’s orders unless immediately appointed governor. His position clear: he intended to support the individual who could offer him the greatest reward with the most speed.8

Shocked, Cooke could do little more than listen as Kearny finished his account. According to the general, once he realized that he could not enforce his authority, he left Los Angeles with his two under-strength dragoon companies and fell back to San Diego. Without the support of Fremont and the California Battalion, Kearny simply lacked the ability to enforce his authority or the will of the government over Stockton. The general, however, was not retreating. He was merely falling back to a more defensible position to await the arrival of reinforcements. An artillery company had already deployed to the West Coast and an infantry regiment of New York volunteers would arrive late in the spring. Combined with Cooke and the Mormon Battalion—whose loyalty were beyond question—Kearny knew it would only be a matter of time before he could rein in Fremont.9

Still, the general hoped to enlist the support of additional allies and announced his intentions to sail that night for Monterey. Days earlier, he learned of the arrival of Commodore Bradford Shubrick, who had been sent to the West Coast to replace Stockton. Kearny no doubt hoped the new commodore carried more recent communications from Washington that might relieve the situation. At the very least, the general hoped to enlist the support Stockton’s
replacement. In the meantime, Kearny wanted Cooke to take charge of the southern military
district, which extended from San Diego to Los Angeles. The general also assigned Companies
C and K of the First Dragoons to Cooke’s command and ordered him to relocate his troops to the
Mission San Luis Rey. The mission would not only offer Cooke a defensible position to guard
against threats from the south, but also place him in proximity to Fremont and the California
Battalion. Unsure of what might transpire, Kearny urged his loyal subordinate to begin training
his volunteers at once. The only other advice the general offered was for Cooke to “await events
and further orders, but to exercise such authority and power as might become necessary. . . under
unforeseen circumstances of national interests and defense.”

Since leaving Fort Crawford, the former dragoon captain had crossed the continent
hoping to experience a clash of arms before the war ended. Now, unless the situation in
California was resolved quickly, it seemed his first battle might be against his own countrymen!
While there was little that could be done to curtail the actions of Stockton—he would soon
depart after relinquishing command of his squadron to Shubrick—Kearny could not abide the
criminal actions of Fremont. If the brash young explorer did not retreat from his position soon, it
would only be a matter of time before a confrontation occurred.

As Cooke rode back to the San Diego Mission, he could not imagine a more chaotic
scenario than the one upon which he had entered. A mutiny had developed in a territory that was
only tenuously held and more than a thousand miles removed from the nation that was
attempting to take possession of it. While organized opposition had been put down, the
population of California, which Cooke noted was “accustomed to seditions and revolutions,”
remained armed, and according to rumors, was only waiting for reinforcements from Mexico to
strike at the Americans once more. To make matters worse, Fremont, the commander of the
largest single American military unit in the territory had mutinied against his superior officer, and the volunteers he commanded had followed suit. The task before Cooke was truly daunting. Years later the bewildered former-dragoon recalled the challenging circumstances he confronted upon his arrival in California: “Lieut.-colonel Cooke was thus left in the command of the only troops in California that had been mustered into the service of the United States; a few dragoons, and a battalion of volunteers, which up to that time had never had opportunity to receive regular instruction in arms.”

In accordance with his instructions, Cooke relocated the Mormon Battalion to the mission at San Luis Rey during the first days of February. From the moment the march began, it was obvious to Cooke that the task before him would be nearly as challenging as had been the ones overcome to get the battalion to California. The men remained gaunt and undernourished, and due to inadequate supply lines, they continued to subsist almost exclusively on beef. The battalion members also remained inadequately clothed. They wore whatever ragged clothing they had left, or had made, since leaving Santa Fe. Furthermore, nearly all the volunteers lacked proper footwear and overcoats to guard against the cold. The only comfort he could offer the volunteers would be the shelter afforded by the old Spanish mission. Unlike the San Diego Mission, the mission at San Luis Rey was in good repair. Set atop majestic slopes that rose from the Pacific, the picturesque mission with white-washed walls and roofs of red tile was surrounded by gardens, vineyards, and wheat fields. A variety of exotic fruit trees grew about the grounds, including olive, orange, and pomegranate trees, and there was also a pepper tree in the main courtyard. The mission compound itself was “immense,” according to Cooke, with buildings stretching nearly sixty yards in length to form the mission’s interior courtyard. The complex also afforded the Mormons enough rooms to spare them from their worn canvas tents—
although the men would struggle against infestations of fleas and other vermin before they could truly appreciate their accommodations.  

Yet, once the volunteers were settled, Cooke left little doubt that he intended to continue holding the battalion to the same rigid standards of discipline normally imposed on regular army units. On the day he congratulated the battalion on the successful conclusion of their march, he also informed the volunteers of the new regulations that would govern their conduct while in garrison at the mission. They would follow a rigorous schedule that would begin with the bugler’s call of reveille at sunrise and keep the men absorbed in numerous duties until eight o’clock in the evening when the bugler blew tattoo. The lieutenant colonel also announced that the battalion members would be required to improve their appearance so that they looked more like soldiers. Whereas Cooke could excuse the volunteers for not adhering to army grooming regulations while on the march, he could not ignore those regulations now that the battalion was in garrison. The declaration disappointed several volunteers. During the march from Santa Fe, most volunteers had stopped shaving and cutting their hair, and they had hoped to be able to show their wives their shaggy manes and impressive whiskers once they returned home. Cooke, however, would make no exceptions. The volunteers were to cut their hair and shave their faces clean.

Cooke also wasted little time implementing Kearny’s orders to train the volunteers. Given the climate of uncertainty, attacks from insurgent Californios, Mexican troops, or Fremont’s California Battalion seemed not only possible, but probable. On February 8, Cooke began instructing the men in close order drill and tactics. Without manuals for the company officers to study, however, the process became one of tedious repetition. Assisted by Lieutenant George Stoneman, the only other regular army officer present, Cooke assembled company
officers into squads each morning at nine o’clock, and by putting them through their paces in the
courtyard, taught them the complicated commands and maneuvers necessary to execute the
evolutions of drill. After an hour instructing the officers, half of the battalion would assemble,
and under the supervision of Cooke and Stoneman, the Mormon officers would “impart what
they had just imperfectly learned” to the noncommissioned officers and enlisted men. To
facilitate the process Cooke divided the companies into squads of ten men and conducted the
exercise at the squad level. He also spared the men the rigor of carrying their weapons during
the exercises until they were better acquainted with the formations and evolutions. In the
afternoon, at three o’clock, the other half of the battalion assembled and repeated the process.¹⁶

For the next five weeks, the daily training rituals absorbed the lives of the Mormon
Battalion members. While some viewed the exercises with levity, noting that it was first time
they had been “taught how to turn around,” Cooke left no doubts as to the seriousness with
which he regarded the training exercises. Errors in formations, missteps, or failures to execute
the intricate evolutions quickly met with the sharp-tongued fury that had made him a legend
among dragoon recruits. On March 6, for example, while leading Companies A and E, Cooke
became so infuriated with the volunteers’ inability to pick up new formations that he began to
berate the companies and storm about their ranks “as tho he was before a set of wild goats.”
Two days later, when the volunteers again failed to master the evolutions, Cooke reduced several
noncommissioned officers in rank. As usual, the disciplinary measures met with mixed reactions
from the volunteers. While some considered the reductions in rank justifiable, others viewed
them as additional evidence of Cooke’s tyrannical nature. What many of the battalion members
did not realize, however, was that a couple of weeks earlier a visitor had arrived at the mission
who reaffirmed the urgency of transforming the Mormons into competent and effective soldiers ready to meet the challenges of combat.\footnote{17}

On February 21, Colonel William Russell of the California Battalion, who also served as secretary of state in “Governor” Frémont’s cabinet, entered the mission complex to deliver a message to Cooke. Traveling to San Diego to attend a ball hosted by Commodore Stockton, Russell interrupted his journey to warn Cooke that any attempt “to displace the present government would be resisted by force.” According to Frémont’s representative, in addition to the 428 volunteers filling the ranks of the California Battalion, there were an additional one thousand natives who would “rise to support Colonel Fremont” if attacked. While Cooke dismissed the threat as “unreliable” bravado, it was a chilling reminder of the stakes involved in the contest between Frémont and Kearny.\footnote{18}

Fueled by Russell’s warning, Cooke drove his volunteers relentlessly. By the second week of March, he authorized Stoneman to begin instruction in the manual of arms and ordered the men to begin carrying their weapons during close order drill. As the skills of the volunteers grew, the battalion commander also increased the size of the formations and the complexity of the evolutions. By mid March the volunteers were capable of maneuvering at the platoon, company, and battalion levels with equal proficiency.

While Cooke was pleased with the progress of his soldiers, remembering in later years that “in a very few weeks the complete battalion exercises were mastered,” he remained troubled by the situation in California. By mid-March, nearly forty days had passed since he had met with General Kearny, and in that time, he had received no communications from anyone—“military, naval, or civil”—in higher authority. He and his men remained impoverished, and there were few indications that their situation would soon improve. Although six wagons filled
with flour, sugar, coffee, and other welcomed commodities arrived at the mission on February 26, there were no indications that regular supplies lines had been established. Moreover, local merchants refused to extend the government credit or accept treasury drafts as payment, and as a result, Cooke was unable to purchase much needed materials. While the number of wild cattle roaming the countryside ensured the battalion members would not starve, the scarcity of other nutritional items compelled Cooke to dispatch two patrols to secure additional food supplies for the battalion. On February 26, Cooke sent Lieutenant George Oman and eleven enlisted men to Warner’s Ranch to secure beans and flour, and two days later, he dispatched Lieutenant Samuel Thompson and thirty-two privates to retrieve some of the wagons and the flour abandoned by the battalion along the banks of the Colorado River. While the situation was far from desperate, Cooke recognized conditions were hardly ideal. If all commands on the West Coast were in as deplorable condition as his, it was a wonder that the Californios had not rose in rebellion once more. The American occupation forces were scattered in isolated garrisons from San Diego to San Francisco. Rumors regarding the rift between the American leadership were growing. And by most appearances, the Americans were undersupplied and incapable of acquiring the materials they needed to expand their control of the Pacific Coast. Summing up the situation in his journal, Cooke could reach but one conclusion: while the military forces of the United States were in a deplorable state, “we hold the Territory because Mexico is poorest of all.”

Meanwhile, as Cooke pushed his Mormon volunteers to master close order drill, General Kearny launched his campaign to dislodge Fremont as territorial governor. After sailing from San Diego on January 31, the general arrived in Monterey after an eight-day voyage and was warmly received by Commodore Bradford Shubrick aboard the U.S.S. Lexington. As a career naval officer whose service began prior to the War of 1812, Shubrick was outraged by Kearny’s
report detailing the conduct of Stockton and Fremont. The new commander of naval operations readily agreed with the general’s claims that Stockton’s actions were baseless and that Fremont’s conduct bordered on treason. Then, as if to validate the general’s arguments, Shubrick produced orders from the naval department dated July 12 that had been issued to Commodore Sloat—or his successor—authorizing the recipient to organize a civil government once California was pacified. While the orders confirmed Stockton’s actions anticipated authorization from his superiors, they confirmed he had acted without it. Although vindicated, Kearny recognized the orders now conferred the power of the governor’s office on Shubrick. Without hesitating, the general offered whatever support he and his troops could give the commodore if he wished to assume control in California. Shubrick, however, demurred. He harbored no such ambitions. Furthermore, the orders were seven months old and the conditions in California had changed dramatically since they had been issued. It would be better to await developments and clarification from Washington.²⁰

To Kearny’s great delight, the wait would not be long. On February 13, after sailing to San Francisco Bay to inspect military installations, the general learned that Colonel Richard Mason was aboard the U.S.S. Erie, a naval supply ship recently returned from a voyage to Panama. Anxious to see an old comrade, and aware the colonel likely carried more recent dispatches from the War Department, Kearny quickly arranged to be transferred to the Erie. Although initially concerned with the health of his comrade—Mason had contracted some unknown illness and was gravely ill—Kearny was gladdened to discover the colonel carried several messages from Washington. Of singular importance was a dispatch dated November 3 from Winfield Scott, the commanding general of the U.S. Army. Scott opened the letter by congratulating Kearny on behalf of President Polk for the successes in New Mexico, and then
proceeded to offer the general precise instructions regarding the management of affairs in California. Accordingly, Kearny was to insure sound defense of the territory and to take command of all volunteer troops raised in California. The general was also to cooperate with “the commander of the United States squadron on the coast of the Pacific,” in regards to the appointment of customs agents and duty rates established by naval officers in accordance to their instructions from the Navy Department. What Scott wrote next, however, instantly changed the situation in California: “On the other hand, the appointment of temporary collectors at the several ports appertains to the civil governor of the Province, who will be for the time be the senior officer of the land forces in the country.” The statement was unequivocal. As the highest ranking army officer in California, Kearny was to assume duties of governor and establish “a temporary civil government.”

Although Kearny remained concerned for the welfare of his friend, he wasted little time returning to Monterey. Following his inspection of the Presidio in San Francisco, Kearny sailed to Monterey to meet with Shubrick. The Secretary of the Navy had sent new instructions to Commodore Stockton as well, and Kearny was anxious to learn their content.

Meeting Shubrick aboard the Lexington once again, Kearny listened closely as his counterpart read the dispatch. Confirming the receipt of Stockton’s report detailing his conquest of the territory the previous summer, the naval secretary’s letter took a sudden turn that undoubtedly pleased Kearny. Hidden among carefully crafted words selected not to give offense to the commodore was the unmistakable message that authorities in Washington did not want him controlling affairs in California. Upon receipt of the dispatch, the commodore was to relinquish control of the territorial government to General Kearny. As stated by the naval secretary: “The President has deemed it best for the public interests to invest the military officer
commanding with the direction of the operations on land with the administrative functions of
government over the people and territory occupied by us.” To add insult to injury, Stockton was
also to surrender command of the Pacific Squadron to Commodore Shubrick once he arrived in
the territory, and return to Washington.22

Vindicated by the new directives, Kearny remained aboard the Lexington through the last
days of February. If he was going to remove Fremont from the governorship and establish
successful military and civil administrations within the territory, Kearny knew he would need the
full cooperation of his naval counterpart, and as the month drew to a close, he worked with
Shubrick to define clear operational boundaries for their respective forces. Then, on March 1, in
a display of unity and cooperation heretofore unknown between the army and navy in California,
the two veteran officers issued a joint proclamation to the people of California that set forth their
agreement. Shubrick, as the “Commander in chief of Naval forces,” would oversee the import
trade and regulate territorial ports. Kearny, as the “Commanding Military Officer,” would
oversee the operations of all land forces and all administrative functions of the territorial
government.

Kearny, however, was not finished. On the same day he and Shubrick issued their joint
proclamation, the general took additional steps to assert his authority as military commander and
governor. As part of his efforts to organize the Tenth Military Department, Kearny issued
Departmental Orders No. 2 to establish the Southern Military District. While the orders touched
on a number of issues, one point was instantly clear: Kearny intended to strip Frémont of all
power and authority in California, and send him out of the territory. The general officially
appointed Cooke as the district’s commander, and declared the Mormon Battalion, Company C
of the First Dragoons, and the California Battalion would all be subject to Cooke’s orders.
Furthermore, as the California Battalion had been improperly mustered into federal service, the battalion members would have to be re-enlisted under current federal regulations or be escorted immediately by Frémont to the territorial capital and discharged. Frémont’s presence in Monterey would also mark the end of his tenure as governor. In a separate set of orders, also dated March 1, 1847, the general directed Frémont to bring “all archives and public documents and papers which may be subject to your control, and which appertain to the government of California, that I may receive them from your hands at this place, the capital of the territory.”

Once Frémont complied with these orders, his tour of duty in California would be at an end: “I have directions from the general-in-chief not to detain you in this country against your wishes a moment longer than the necessities of the service may require,” concluded Kearny, “you will be at liberty to leave here after you have complied with these instructions.”

To ensure the orders were not lost in transit, Kearny sent his acting assistant adjutant general, Captain Henry S. Turner, First Dragoons, to deliver them along with a copy of the joint proclamation to Fremont’s headquarters in Los Angeles. Arriving on March 11, Turner handed the instructions to Frémont and watched as the lieutenant colonel read them. Turner was pleasantly surprised when the lieutenant colonel instantly pledged that he would obey the instructions. Accordingly, Frémont assured the general’s representative that he would ride to the San Gabriel Mission—where the California Battalion was garrisoned—and conduct the muster as ordered the next day. Thinking Frémont sincere, Turner departed the following morning for San Luis Rey. General Kearny had also entrusted the captain to deliver Cooke’s new orders confirming his appointment as commander of the Southern Military District.

Had Frémont complied with Kearny’s orders, it is not beyond the realm of possibilities to believe the general might have allowed the explorer simply to leave California. Scott’s orders,
after all, explicitly stated: “Should you find him [Fremont] there, it is desired that you do not detain him, against his wishes, a moment longer than the necessity of the service requires.”

Although the explorer’s conduct provided ample justification for arrest and court-martial, Kearny had yet to determine his course of action regarding Frémont. In an age when political connections could be as important to one’s military career as professional accomplishment, Kearny realized that any disciplinary action taken against Fremont would likely incur the wrath of the Pathfinder’s father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. Although the two men had been friends and political allies for decades, Kearny was aware that he would place their relationship in jeopardy if he did anything to damage the career or reputation of Frémont. In fact, contemporary accounts suggest the general was as troubled by the possibility of losing Benton’s support and friendship as he was the implications of allowing Frémont to go without answering for his actions before a general court-martial. As noted by Captain Turner in a letter to his wife dated February 22, 1847:

“He permitted Fremont to disobey his orders without arresting him, and much to the disappointment and mortification of the few Army Officers present. The General is swayed too much by Benton, and what is still worse, by what he supposes will be agreeable to Benton . . . . Were I to behave as Fremont has done he would cause me to be put in irons, and would pursue me with a bitterness that would drive me to desperation. Yet this man is permitted to escape almost without a murmur. He says that he will prefer charges against Fremont and cause him to be tried, but I do not believe it. I think he will do nothing calculated to give displeasure to Col. Benton. Mark what I say, General Kearny will not prefer charges against Fremont and if he does, he will not be tried by a court martial, although his conduct has been outrageous.”

For reasons yet to be determined, however, Frémont did not comply with Kearny’s directives. Instead, Frémont set into motion a series of events that revealed the extent of his detachment from the realities of his situation. In the process, the beleaguered explorer nearly provoked a clash between American forces in California that ultimately sealed his downfall.
Welcoming Turner at San Luis Rey on or about March 14, Cooke received his new orders, along with copies of Department Orders No. 2 and the joint circular, with much personal satisfaction. He was equally pleased to hear Turner’s report that Frémont had finally relented in his opposition to the general and had agreed to obey instructions. Anxious to learn the status of the California Battalion, or possibly to test Frémont’s fidelity, Cooke immediately exercised his purgatives as district commander and dispatched a courier to Los Angeles to learn how many members of Frémont’s battalion had agreed to reenlist. Three days later, however, the good feelings brought on by Turner’s report were abruptly ended. On March 17, Cooke learned that Frémont’s change in attitude was short lived. The California Battalion’s commanding officer had changed his mind once again. In a letter signed by William Russell, Cooke learned that every member of the California Battalion had “without an individual exception” declined “to be mustered into the United States service, conformable to Order No. 2.” Furthermore, the letter made it clear that Frémont was unwilling to surrender either command of his battalion, or his claims to the governor’s office. According to Russell, who wrote and signed the letter as the Secretary of State, “the governor (Fremont) considers it unsafe at this time, when rumor is rife with a threatened insurrection, to discharge the battalion, and will decline doing so . . .”

Stunned by Frémont’s sudden reversal, Cooke immediately ordered his command to prepare to march. The general had suggested Cooke establish the headquarters for the southern district in Los Angeles, and Frémont’s continued insubordination served as grounds for Cooke to act on the Kearny’s advice. Cook never stated his intentions; however, he clearly intended to intimidate Frémont by marching on Los Angeles with nearly his full complement of troops.

On March 18, the district commander suspended the normal regime of drill and directed the battalion’s quartermasters to issue four days reduced rations to Companies A, C, D, and E,
and directed Company C of the First Dragoons to prepare their mounts to march the next day. Meanwhile, acting on his orders from General Kearny to return immediately to Monterey if Frémont balked, Captain Turner set out for the new territorial capital upon receipt of Russell’s letter. Displaying incredible endurance, Turner made the journey of more than four hundred miles in five days, arriving at Kearny’s headquarters on March 22.

Yet, Turner was not the only one displaying impressive endurance in the saddle. On March 22, Frémont set off from Los Angeles with Don Jesus Pico and a servant, Jacob Dodson, to make an impromptu call on the general. Driving extra horses to maximize the distances they covered each day, Frémont’s party literally raced the three hundred and fifty miles separating Los Angeles from Monterey in slightly more than three days. Before his departure, however, Frémont left specific, and considering the circumstances, potentially explosive instructions with Captain Richard “Dick” Owens who commanded the California Battalion at the San Gabriel Mission. Assuming the tone of a besieged dictator attempting to stave off a coup d’état, the desperate Frémont commanded Owens to “make no move whatever from San Gabriel, in my absence . . . or obey the order of any officer that does not emanate from me.” Frémont also declared that the garrison commander was to hold the “public arms and munitions belonging to the command, and turn them over to no corps without my special orders.”

When Cooke arrived at the outskirts of Los Angeles on March 23, he learned for the first time that Fremont had left the pueblo to meet with General Kearny. Rather than push his volunteers the additional seven miles to reach the San Gabriel Mission, the increasingly frustrated district commander decided to put off his inspection of the California Battalion and ordered his command to encamp outside the pueblo. Aware that a number of the California volunteers were from Missouri, where anti-Mormon sentiments still ran deep, Cooke also
decided he would conduct his inspection of Frémont’s troops without the security of the Mormons. Rumors hinting of attacks on the Mormons were already swirling and Cooke did not wish to provoke a confrontation.²⁹

On the morning of March 24, Cooke left the Mormons in their encampment and rode to San Gabriel accompanied only by Dr. Sanderson and Lieutenant Davidson of the First Dragoons. Although the journey through the lush river valley was pleasant, as Cooke neared his destination, he became increasingly apprehensive about the reception he would receive once he reached the garrison. Without knowing what Frémont had told the members of the California Battalion regarding the controversies in which he had become embroiled, Cooke could not be sure the members of the California Battalion would recognize his authority as district commander. Nor could he be sure as to the extent the California volunteers would go to resist him if he attempted to exercise his authority. Prior to his arrival, Cooke met “a gentleman who said he was the [California Battalion’s] adjutant,” whose confession of ignorance regarding the strained relationship between Kearny and Stockton—and by extension, Frémont—was shocking. Attempting to enlighten the confused volunteer, Cooke showed him the copies of the Kearny-Shubrick circular and the departmental orders that subordinated the California Battalion to him as commander of the Southern Military Department. After viewing the documents, the adjutant declared it was the first time he had seen or heard of either.

Based on his experience with the battalion’s adjutant, once Cooke arrived at the mission, he opened his encounter with Captain Owens by delivering copies of the joint circular and the new departmental orders. Owens made no effort to read the documents and merely glanced at the pages as he shuffled through them. Unwilling to allow the volunteer officer the convenience of his ignorance, Cooke immediately summarized their content. He explained Kearny’s position
regarding the Californians’ status as volunteers, and declared that as the battalion members had declined to be properly mustered, “they were not really in the United States service, unless for the purpose of being marched to a point to be discharged.” Until then, Cooke was the district commander and the members of the California Battalion were subject to his orders. Owens made no response.30

Unsure as to whether Owens’ silence indicated acceptance or indifference, Cooke ordered the garrison commander to lead his party on an inspection tour of the San Gabriel Mission. Declaring his intentions of posting the Mormons at the mission, Cooke wanted to see the grounds and buildings. The sudden announcement broke Owens’ silence. Unsure as to whether Cooke meant to evict the Californians or simply impose his troops, the garrison commander quickly responded that there was not room enough for the 206 California volunteers already posted at the mission. The garrison commander’s quiet demeanor disappeared altogether a few moments later when Cooke noticed two mountain howitzers in the mission courtyard. Conferring with Lieutenant Davidson to confirm that the artillery pieces the ones that had been lost by the dragoons during the Battle of San Pasqual, Cooke ordered the howitzers returned to their rightful owners that day. Owens abruptly declared that he could not allow the two artillery pieces to be removed from the mission. He was under direct orders not to surrender any of the garrison’s ordnance to anyone without authorization from Fremont.

Shocked by the defiant outburst, Cooke reminded the volunteer captain that General Kearny, in his capacity as military commander and governor of California, had appointed him as district commander, and as such, all members of the California Battalion—including Frémont—were subject to his orders. Owens had no legal grounds upon which to defy Cooke’s commands. Again, Cooke produced the joint circular and Kearny’s departmental order, and read them to
Owens. When asked if he still intended to defy the authority of the United States government by refusing to obey a lawful order and release the howitzers, Owens responded that “it was hard to know what was the legal authority,—he knew none but Colonel Frémont.” When Cooke demanded Owens produce Frémont’s orders, the captain quickly complied. Yet, when Cooke requested pen and paper to copy the orders, Owens refused to furnish the supplies and reclaimed his copies. Cooke attempted to appeal to Owens’ sense of patriotism and “painted the disastrous circumstances likely to result to public interests, and to persons, from this treasonable course,” but his efforts were “in vain.” With all avenues of reason, and his patience, exhausted, Cooke left the mission before his temper got the better of him.31

Believing it his duty to explore all possible measures to fulfill his orders, Cooke tried to retrieve the howitzers later that afternoon. After returning to his quarters in Los Angeles, he met with Captain John K. Wilson, the California Battalion’s ordinance officer, who asserted that he could secure the artillery without further incident. Frémont’s loyal subordinate, however, remained steadfast in his refusal to surrender possession of the howitzers. Left to his own devices, Cooke would have summoned the Mormon Battalion and enforced his authority with the tips of their bayonets. Only his years of service and mature understanding of the damage such actions would do to the American mission in California prevented him from acting on his passions. Still, Cooke remained understandably angry and vented his displeasure in the report he wrote of the incident:

I have every reason to doubt that steps were taken to allow the men of that battalion to decide, knowingly, upon their being mustered into service according to law and order. . . . Lieutenant Colonel Fremont had not gone out to San Gabriel to attend to it. I look upon them generally as good citizens, but cruelly . . . misguided, and deceived. I would attempt to undeceive them, but that I deem that the public good requires that the matter should be unknown . . . . If these Americans are taught not to obey the legal authority of the government, what dangerous impression must have unavoidably been
imparted to the late enemy, who surround us . . . . I sacrifice all feeling or pride to duty, which I think plainly forbids any attempt to crush this resistance of misguided men. It would be a signal for revolt. The general’s orders are not obeyed!32

In the wake of the “affair of the refused cannon,” Cooke moved the Mormon Battalion to a hilltop overlooking Los Angeles. The incident at the mission, combined with growing rumors of raids against the Mormons by Frémont’s men or Californios, spurred Cooke to place his volunteers in a more strategically advantageous location. The Los Angeles area, in his opinion, remained “a hot bed of sedition.”33 Change was coming, however. On March 30, after again pledging to obey General Kearny’s orders, Frémont returned to the pueblo. Days later, to ensure the fallen governor did not again change his mind, Colonel Richard B. Mason also arrived. Fully recovered from his illness, Mason had been sent as Kearny’s personal representative to see that Frémont discharged his orders in a timely fashion. Mason was “clothed,” the general declared, “with full authority to give such orders and instructions, upon all matters both civil and military . . . as he may deem proper and necessary.” The general had clearly tired of Frémont’s antics and was anxious to rid the territory of the Pathfinder.

Mason’s presence yielded immediate benefits for Cooke. Determined not to allow the former governor to retreat from his pledge of cooperation, Mason denied Frémont the independence to which he had become accustomed and permitted him to do little more than carry out Kearny’s orders. As a first step in the process of discharging the California Battalion, for example, Mason not only arranged the return of the two howitzers to the dragoons, he transferred all the artillery and ordinance stores held at San Gabriel into Cooke’s custody. Once the transfer was complete, Mason ensured Frémont discharged his volunteers and saw them leave Los Angeles for their homes in the territory’s northern valleys. Of course Frémont bristled under
such close supervision—going so far as to challenge Mason to a duel in mid April. Still, by the end of the month, Frémont had settled nearly all his affairs and the only men who stood by him were a few of the frontiersmen who had entered the territory with him as part of his topographical expedition.34

Mason’s presence also allowed Cooke to turn his attention to the administration of the southern district. The turmoil created in the region by the American invasion had signaled an opportunity for Paiute warriors to launch raids against outlying ranches and settlements within the limits of the southern district. In an effort to cultivate a more stable relationship with the Hispanic residents within his command, Cooke quickly responded to the Indian depredations by deploying Captain A.J. Smith and a detachment of forty dragoons to patrol the settlements northwest of Los Angeles on March 31. Two weeks later, as reports of depredations increased, he also deployed Company C of the Mormon Battalion to Cajon Pass to establish a post in the area hit hardest by the attacking warriors. Believing the population of California had long suffered the effects of a neglectful government, Cooke hoped the demonstration of his willingness to protect the settlements and chastise the Indians would make inroads with those who still harbored ill-will toward the Americans. Yet, Cooke’s hopes of gaining the support of the Californios were soon dashed. Reports received from his officers in the field revealed the locals were unwilling to cooperate with his soldiers. Settlers and ranchers near Cajon Pass, for example, refused to sell cattle to the Mormons erecting the post or sell horses to the dragoons patrolling the area. Frustrated, Cooke quietly considered the possibility that he had made a mistake by responding so quickly to their demands for protection, and wondered if he would have been better served had he treated their applications for assistance with “indifference.”35
As April drew to a close, however, it was becoming increasingly clear to all that the United States would never again be challenged for possession of California. Although reports of Indian depredations and rumors of invasions by Mexican armies occasionally stirred passions, even the specter of insurrection seemed to disappear as summer neared. The territory and its residents, however begrudgingly, seemed resigned to the reality that they would become part of the United States. The realization that the struggle for California was over gave Cooke an opportunity to reflect upon his circumstances in the war. While he had set aside his personal ambitions at the onset of the war to answer Kearny’s call, he still dreamt of leading men into battle and winning personal glory. Yet reports trickling up from Mexico indicated that the war would not last much longer. If he was going to experience battle, he needed to leave California. Weeks earlier, the War Department had notified him that he had been transferred to the Second Dragoons with a promotion to the rank of major. At the time the situation in California demanded he remain in the territory, but as the invasions failed to materialize and Frémont no longer rivaled Kearny, Cooke believed he had done his duty and wrote the general requesting to be relieved of duty. He wanted to join his new regiment in Mexico.

Cooke learned of the general’s decision on May 10, 1847, when Kearny and a small retinue of officers arrived in Los Angeles. Kearny also considered the territory secure and was also ready to return to the East. Before taking his leave, however, he wanted to visit the former capital to observe firsthand the demeanor of the local residents and to inspect the area’s military installations to ensure their defensive capabilities. The inspection tour would also permit him to personally tend to a few matters that he deemed to be of particular importance. Establishing his quarters in the home hosting Cooke, the general immediately dispatched his aid, a young lieutenant named William Tecumseh Sherman, to fetch Frémont. In the meantime, as the two
men awaited Sherman’s return, Kearny announced his intentions to return to the States in June. Colonel Mason would assume the governorship and take command of the Tenth Military Department. More importantly, however, Colonel J.D. Stevenson of the First New York Volunteers would take over Cooke’s duties as the commander of the Southern Military District. Knowing the sacrifices made by Cooke thus far in the war, Kearny would not deny his loyal comrade the opportunity to join his new regiment while the contest in Mexico still raged. The general, however, hoped Cooke would join him on his return journey. Two years earlier, they had ridden from Fort Leavenworth to the South Pass, now Kearny wanted to complete the transcontinental march by taking the California Road from Sutter’s Fort to its junction with the Oregon Trace and return to Fort Leavenworth via the South Pass. Cooke readily accepted both offers.36

When Sherman finally returned with Frémont, the tone in the room immediately changed. Kearny sternly informed Frémont that he was to proceed to Monterey without delay and await additional orders. Most likely sensing the implications of Kearny’s directive, Frémont requested permission to forego the journey to Washington and proceed immediately to Mexico to join his regiment with General Scott’s army. He had sixty men, 120 horses, ample supplies of dried beef, and was anxious to reach General Scott’s command before the war ended. The request was flatly denied. When Frémont sought permission to begin the trek east immediately, Kearny also refused the request. The general would not allow the troublesome explorer the liberty of making the cross-country journey at his convenience or without supervision. After much consideration, Kearny had decided that for the good of the service, Frémont had to be held accountable for his actions. Although he mentioned it to no one save his correspondence with the adjutant general, Kearny intended to arrest Frémont at Fort Leavenworth.37
The final priority Kearny wished to address on his hectic first day in Los Angeles was to encourage the members of the Mormon Battalion to reenlist. There were approximately three hundred Mormons on active duty in California, which meant that the battalion constituted the bulk of the 1,059 ground troops then posted in California. It would be a severe blow to the defense of the territory if the battalion was lost. Hoping a personal appeal to the members of the battalion might entice them to consider extending their terms of service, the general rode with Cooke and Stevenson to the post being constructed by the Mormons and inspected the battalion. In spite of their ragged appearance, Kearny and Stevenson seemed genuinely impressed by the skill and precision the Mormons demonstrated as they passed in review. After informing the battalion that Cooke was resigning as their commanding officer, Kearny praised the volunteers for their dedication and service, their fortitude, and their patriotism. He pledged to report their conduct to the “President and in the halls of congress” so that they could receive the “justice” they “merited.” Kearny then appealed to the battalion members, especially the unmarried men, to continue with the duties they had so ably performed. Kearny’s appeals, however, fell on deaf ears.

The members of the Mormon Battalion were already counting down the days they had remaining in their enlistments. In April, the ecclesiastical authorities within the battalion had circulated a petition to have the Mormons dismissed early because peace had been declared in the territory. They were also growing increasingly disturbed by the un-Saintly behavior a number of the volunteers were too frequently displaying. Although the petition was signed by “most of the soldiers,” the battalion’s officers wisely kept it from Cooke. Since then, the battalion members had only grown increasingly anxious to return to the prairies of Iowa Territory and reunite with their families. As one historian astutely observed, “No inducements,
short of another call from Brigham Young, would entice . . . them to re-enlist.” The general did, however, have more success securing the services of fifteen Mormons to serve as members of his escort for the upcoming march to Fort Leavenworth.\(^{39}\)

On May 14, Cooke departed Los Angeles with Kearny aboard the *U.S.S. Lexington* bound for Monterey. Arriving two weeks later, Cooke barely had time to gather his outfit for the journey to Fort Leavenworth when the general announced the expedition would begin on May 31. Cooke joined Kearny’s caravan of travelers, which numbered sixty-four men and more than one hundred seventy public and private animals—including Fremont and twenty-eight members of his topographical expedition. No doubt to the relief of his Mormon escorts, who were commanded by Lieutenant Sherman, Kearny provided mounts for them to ride and spared them the agony of having to walk from California to Fort Leavenworth. By all accounts the journey was fairly uneventful. The most challenging obstacles faced during the expedition occurred during the first stages of the march when the travelers had to ford several streams swelled by runoff created by the record snowfall of the previous winter. At several crossings, boats were upset and several pieces of equipment were lost to the currents. In fact, a couple of days before the caravan reached Sutter’s Fort, the bull boat Cooke hired to cross his personal baggage capsized, sending all of his possessions—including his journals—irretrievably downstream. Cooke was left with no possessions other than the uniform he wore for the duration of the journey.\(^{40}\)

On June 22, however, Cooke and the other members of the general’s column discovered the inconveniences they suffered were insignificant compared to the devastation the snows had visited on an ill-fated party of emigrants. Five days after leaving Sutter’s Fort, the column came upon one of the campsites built by members of the Donner Party after it became trapped by snow
high in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The remains of perhaps as many as thirty individuals littered the grounds and cabins, and the evidence of cannibalism was undeniable. The partially consumed skeletons and caches of bones inside the cabins presented what one witness described as “a revolting & distressing spectacle.” The column immediately stopped and Kearny ordered a detail to gather the remains for burial. Then, to eliminate the lingering stench and to wipe away all traces of the nightmarish episode, Kearny ordered the campsite destroyed. The cabins, wagons, and abandoned luggage were burned.\(^{41}\)

Over the course of the next sixty days, Kearny pushed his column to maintain the pace that had made his marches legendary. After descending from the Rockies in late June, the caravan crossed the northern reaches of the Great Basin, and by July 13, was traveling toward the South Pass on the main branch of the Oregon Trail. On August 2, the travelers entered Fort Laramie where Kearny and his officers held a brief council with a group of Lakota chiefs before resuming their course along the North Platte River. Two days later, the column learned that the Mormon emigration into the West had begun when it came upon the camp of some three thousand Saints approximately fifty miles east of Fort Laramie. During his interview with the leaders of the emigrant party, Kearny learned the Saints no longer intended to settle in California. Brigham Young had selected the Salt Lake Valley as the site of the Mormon Zion. Three weeks later, on August 22, Kearny’s party entered the parade field at Fort Leavenworth, and in accordance to the plans he had made in California, he arrested Frémont within moments of his arrival at the post.\(^{42}\)

The next day, along with General Kearny, Cooke boarded the steamer *Amelia* bound for St. Louis. During the voyage, Cooke inquired if he would be needed to testify at the court-martial that would inevitable result from Frémont’s arrest. The question was entirely pragmatic.
He wished to join his regiment as soon as possible in Mexico and hoped to avoid being detained in order to stand as a witness against Frémont. No doubt to Cooke’s great relief, the general responded that he did not believe Cooke’s testimony would be necessary. The general believed most of the testimony would be documentary since several of the participants in the drama remained in California. Satisfied that he would not be denied his opportunity to gain glory on the battlefield, Cooke settled into his cabin for the leisurely voyage downriver.

In St. Louis he would have the pleasure of a few days with his family before traveling to Vera Cruz, Mexico, to join the Second Dragoons and participate in General Winfield Scott’s campaign to capture the Mexican capital. Before he left California, Cooke learned Scott had invaded Mexico in March at the site where Cortez launched his conquest of the Aztec Empire three centuries earlier. Cooke, however, realized that Scott’s campaign would not suffer the same delays endured by the conquistador’s army. Reports of Scott’s victories already filled eastern newspapers. Cooke wasted little time booking his passage to New Orleans, where he boarded a military transport to Vera Cruz.⁴³

Cooke arrived in Mexico in late September or early October following the capture of Mexico City. Yet, the major did not despair. Mexico had not surrendered. While, Santa Anna’s army had been broken during the bloody struggles for the capital, Molina del Rey, and Chapultepec, he had yet to lay down his sword. Furthermore, bands of guerilla fighters still roamed the countryside looking for targets of opportunity in hopes that their unconventional tactics might prolong the war. In short, the fighting continued and Cooke anxiously awaited his opportunity. Yet, as had been his fate throughout the war, Cooke was again denied that which he desired most. Guerilla activities along the road to Mexico City necessitated Cooke remain in Vera Cruz until a column was organized to take supplies and reinforcements into the interior. As
Cooke lingered an urgent dispatch arrived from the War Department ordering him to report as soon as possible to the Washington Arsenal. He had been called as a witness in the court-martial of Lieutenant Colonel John C. Frémont. The trial was scheduled to begin on November 2.\textsuperscript{44}

When Cooke arrived in Washington, in all likelihood, Frémont’s court-martial already had begun. Frémont faced three charges: “mutiny,” “disobedience of the lawful command of his superior officer,” and “conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline.” The charges were supported by a total of twenty-three specifications. Frémont, of course, pled not guilty. In light of the overwhelming evidence, the trial should have been a simple affair. Frémont was guilty as sin of all three charges. Yet, in the execution of the trial, General George M. Brooke, the president of the court, was either intimidated by Frémont’s celebrity or the imposing presence of his father-in-law, Senator Benton, who served as counsel to the plaintiff. In either case, rather than restricting Frémont’s defense to disproving the charges, the court permitted Frémont tremendous latitude. As a result, Frémont transformed the trial from an inquiry into his innocence or guilt into a prosecution of his accusers. Rather than attempt to disprove the charges against him, Frémont attempted to paint the witnesses testifying against him as participants in a grand conspiracy organized by General Kearny to discredit him and destroy his reputation. Had it not been for the seriousness of what the trial represented—the principles that the military was subject to a chain of command and subordinate to civil authority—the proceedings would have been laughable.\textsuperscript{45}

When Cooke was finally called to the stand on November 18 to supply his testimony on the “refused canon affair,” he too was badgered by Frémont’s unorthodox line of questioning. Rather than attempt to discredit Cooke’s conduct or the legality of his orders to Captain Owens, Frémont attempted to paint the major as one of main players in Kearny’s conspiracy. Instead of
asking about the events that transpired at the San Gabriel Mission, Frémont asked when Cooke learned of the general’s intent to place him under arrest. Frémont also wanted to know if Cooke was the author of a highly prejudicial newspaper editorial written under the penname “Justice” that appeared in the *Missouri Republican*, in spite of the fact that the judge advocate had forbidden lines of questions pertaining to such publications. When the accused finally questioned Cooke regarding his report of the encounter at the San Gabriel Mission, it was essentially to accuse the major of being a coward. Focusing on Cooke’s decision not to “crush this resistance of misguided men,” the major was asked if he would have been so bold had he found Frémont “instead of Captain Owens at the head of the California battalion?” The court objected to the question and would not permit Cooke to answer.⁴⁶

After a week of Frémont’s irritating questions and attempts at character assassination, Cooke was finally allowed to step down from the witness stand. Anxious to return to his regiment, the major quickly requested permission from the adjutant general to return to Mexico. When Frémont’s legal team learned Cooke was leaving Washington, however, they immediately recalled him as a witness. They argued that additional testimony from him was essential to corroborate statements made by a subsequent witness that would aid their defense against the charge of disobedience. When the court reminded Frémont that Cooke had been dismissed, the accused pleaded ignorance—insinuating that the court was also plotting against him.⁴⁷

Cooke was never recalled to testify at Frémont’s trial. Still, the threat that the Pathfinder might use Cooke’s unavailability to prolong or discredit the proceedings compelled officials in the War Department to rescind their orders allowing Cooke to join his regiment in Mexico. While frustrating, the War Department’s decision yielded unintended benefits for Cooke. When he requested permission to return to Mexico, he routed his trip through St. Louis in order to
resolve a few administrative issues plaguing his former company in the First Dragoons. As a consequence of the decision to delay Cooke’s departure, he was able to pass the holidays with his wife and family. In fact, he would not be permitted to leave the country until January 18, 1848.48

In the meantime, Frémont’s court-martial drug on in the same manner that it had begun until its verdict was handed down on January 31, 1848. The court found him guilty on all charges and specifications. Their sentence demanded Frémont be dismissed from the army, but four members of the court recommended leniency. Polk agreed. Although the president agreed Frémont was guilty of the second and third charges, he was steadfast in his opinion that the charge of mutiny had not been satisfactorily proven by the prosecution. On February 16, Polk attempted to salvage the dignity of the service and Frémont’s reputation. He approved the court’s verdicts on the second and third charges, but remitted the court’s sentence. Frémont, however, was outraged. He would not remain in the army if the president permitted the guilty verdicts to stand, and in March, Frémont resigned his commission after not hearing any word from the president.49

When Cooke finally returned to Mexico, it was too late to find glory. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had been signed in February bring the war to an end. Arriving at Second Dragoons headquarters in Mexico City on April 8, Cooke immediately assumed command of the regiment. Its commanding officer, Colonel William S. Harney, and its lieutenant colonel, Thomas T. Fauntleroy, had both taken extended leaves and were out of the country. Cooke was left with the inglorious tasks of administering to the supply needs of his new regiment as it patrolled the countryside surrounding the capital city. Fate, it seemed, had not only robbed him of the opportunity for which he had dedicated his life, but mandated that he be destined to endure
the mundane. In light of his extreme disappointment, the professional resolve with which Cooke typically faced such setback vanished. As the weeks passed he grew increasingly melancholy. When orders finally arrived at headquarters directing the Second Dragoons to begin their withdrawal from Mexico, Cooke seized upon the moment and requested extended sick leave. He would lead the dragoons in their march to Vera Cruz, picking up companies from their outposts, and organizing rear guard patrols until transport arrived to bring the regiment home.50

Returning to St. Louis late in the summer, Cooke could not hide the toll the war had taken on him. He was physically and emotionally exhausted, and to his family, he appeared “almost an invalid.” For the next two months, Cooke rested.51

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1 Cooke, Mormon Battalion Journal, 84-85.

Transcripts of the letters exchanged between Kearny and Stockton can be found in numerous government publications, for example, “Commodore Stockton’s despatches, relating to the military and naval operations in California,” *Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, Senate Executive Document, No. 31, 30th Congress, 2nd Session, 28-30. The famed “Pathfinder” of the topographical engineers, had been in California since the winter proceeding the outbreak of the war and had played a nominal role in organization of the Bear Flag Revolt during the summer of 1846. Following the occupation of Monterey Bay by U.S. naval forces, Fremont received an appointment as a major of volunteers from Commodore Stockton and had assisted with the initial conquest of the territory. The history of Fremont’s exploits have been well documented and are too numerous to name. Among the more notable are: John C. Fremont, *Memoirs of My Life* (Chicago: Belford, Clarke, & Co., 1887); Allen Nivins, *Fremont: Pathmaker of the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder: John Charles Fremont and the Course of American Empire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002); and Ferol Egan, *Fremont: Explorer for a Restless Nation* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1977).

3 “Commodore Stockton’s despatches, relating to the military and naval operations in California,” *Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, Senate Executive Document, No. 31, 30th Congress, 2nd Session, 24-30. (Hereafter cited as “Stockton’s despatches.”)


8 “The proceedings of the court martial in the trial of Lieutenant Colonel Fremont,” *Message of the President of the United States*, Senate Executive Documents, No. 33, 30th Congress, 1st Session, 5-6, 39. (Hereafter cited as: “The trial of Lieutenant Colonel Fremont.”)


10 Subrick arrived in California on January 22, 1847.
Chronicles of the battalion left no doubt concerning the deplorable state of the volunteers. Most of the battalion members had only the clothing they wore on their backs when they arrived in San Diego. Quoting the diary of Henry Standage, Ricketts provides perhaps the most telling example: “Went into the garden and washed my shirt and a pair of pants, which I had made out of an old wagon cover—all the clothing I had.” See Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 121. On March 9, 1847, Cooke noted: “A frost last night; many of the men, volunteers and dragoons, have long been barefooted! they march on guard barefooted; none have overcoats; the volunteers never had them.” See Cooke, The Conquest of New Mexico and California, 282-83.


“Occupation of Mexican Territory,” 15. Also see Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 280; Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 269-70; Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, 127; Bigler and Bagley, Army of Israel, 1986; and Fleek, History May Be Searched in Vain, 335.

Clarke, Kearny, 276-77. Scott’s dispatch to Kearny can be found in the several congressional reports containing correspondence relating to the occupation of New Mexico and California during the Mexican War. To cite but one: “Occupation of Mexican Territory,” Message from the President of the United States, Senate Executive Documents, 62nd Congress, 2nd Session, No. 896, 16-18.

Clarke, Kearny, 277-78. The dispatch was signed by the new Secretary of the Navy J.Y. Mason, who had recently replaced George Bancroft. “Occupation of Mexican Territory,” Message from the President of the United States, House Executive Documents, 29th Congress, 2nd Session, No. 19, 89-91. It should be noted that both the dispatches from Scott and Mason made it equally clear that in the absence of General Kearny all ground forces and the control of civil affairs were to be turned over to Colonel Richard Mason upon his arrival in the territory. While not immediately obvious to the casual observer, it should be noted that the deployment of Colonel Mason to California was also a conscious decision to avoid yet more controversy. Had Colonel Mason not been deployed, and if Kearny had not arrived, the highest ranking army officer in California would have been Colonel J. D. Stevenson—the volunteer colonel of the First New York Infantry Regiment—or Lieutenant Colonel John C. Fremont of the Mounted Rifles. The fact that the army would go through such great pains to ensure the presence of Colonel Mason in California should be seen as a clear indication that government authorities wanted a senior officer of the regular to oversee affairs on the West Coast. Citing the journal of Captain Samuel F. Du Pont, Clarke points out in his biography of Kearny: “... the moment old Sloat reached Washington and the government learned Stockton was left here, authority was immediately transferred back to General Kearny. But for fear he should not have arrived, Colonel Mason was dispatched with the appointment of governor.” See Clark, Kearny, 278-79.

“The trial of Lieutenant Colonel Fremont,” 33.


Russell to Cooke, March 16, 1847, “The trial of Lieutenant Colonel Fremont,” 15. Also see Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, 286-88 and Young, Cooke, 231.
As part of his orders from General Kearny, Cooke had been directed to send one company to establish a garrison at San Diego. On March 17, Cooke sent Company B under Captain Jesse D. Hunter. They would not serve with their fellow Mormons again until the battalion was discharged in July. See Bigler and Bagley, *Army of Israel*, 201–06, and Ricketts, *The Mormon Battalion*, 131–141.


“*The trial of Lieutenant Colonel Fremont*,” 14.

In his memoir, Tyler notes that the local Hispanic population of Los Angeles had been told that the Mormon were “cannibals, and especially fond of eating children,” by Fremont’s men. See Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 276. Also see Ricketts, *The Mormon Battalion*, 145 and Clark, *Stephen Watts Kearny*, 303-04.

Cooke, *Conquest of New Mexico and California*, 290.

Cooke to Turner, March 25, 1847, “*The trial of Lieutenant Colonel John C. Fremont*,” 124-125. Also see, Cooke, *Conquest of New Mexico and California*, 290-92 and Young, Cooke, 232-33.

Cooke to Turner, March 25, 1847, “*The trial of Lieutenant Colonel John C. Fremont*,” 124-125.


Fremont’s challenge stemmed from an argument with Mason that took place on April 14. During the heated confrontation, Fremont lost his temper and began to shout insults at his superior officers, which prompted an immediate curt response from Mason. Shouting down his subordinate, Mason declared, “None of your insolence or I will put you in irons.” Fremont stormed out of Mason’s office, but the next day, he sent a representative to deliver his challenge. Mason immediately accepted, and as the challenged party, he selected double-barreled shotguns as the weapons with which the duel would be fought. The duel, however, never took place. See Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 377; Eagan, *Fremont*, 424-25; Clarke, *Kearny*, 308-09; and Young, Cooke, 232-33.


Clarke, *Kearny*, 312-17.


Jones, “*Extracts of from the Life Sketch of Nathan V. Jones*,” 17. Also see Fleek, *History May Be Searched in Vain*, 362.

Fleek notes that when the battalions term of service finally expired in July, only 82 Mormons reenlisted. See Fleek, *History May Be Searched in Vain*, 363-66.

Among the items Cooke lost were the journals containing his personal records of his wartime experience: the journey to Santa Fe, the march of the Mormon Battalion, and his account of power struggle between Fremont and Kearny. Fortunately, almost miraculously, the waterproof bundle containing Cooke’s journals were recovered about a year later and returned to Cooke. Clarke, *Stephen Watts Kearny*, 328.

Clarke, *The Journals of Henry Smith Turner*, 129; Clarke, *Stephen Watts Kearny*, 332; and Fleek, *History May Be Searched in Vain*, 369-70. Nathan V. Jones, a member of Kearny’s Mormon escort, noted that as the somber tasks were being carried out at the Donner Party campsite, Fremont and the members of this topographical party passed through the site but none offered to assist. See Jones, “*Extracts of from the Life Sketch of Nathan V. Jones*,” 19.


Young, Cooke, 2334-35 and Clarke, Kearny, 337-38.


Several works consider the court-martial in detail that seems beyond the scope of the present study. Perhaps the most comprehensive study is the chapter presented in Ferol Egan’s biography. The most noteworthy, in terms of its analysis of the trial, is undoubtedly Dwight Clarke’s examination in his biography of Kearny.

“The trial of Lieutenant Colonel John C. Fremont,” 122-48. Also see Young, Cooke, 236-38 and Clarke, Kearny, 257-58.

Young, Cooke, 237-38.

Young, Cooke, 238-40.

Young, Cooke, 239; Clarke, *Kearny*, 368; Chafen, *Pathfinder*, 381; and Egan, *Fremont*, 461-62.

Young, Cooke, 240.

Aftermath and Conclusion

In the fall of 1848, Major Philip St. George Cooke returned to active duty and launched what would prove to be the second half of his storied military career. Unfortunately, the second half of his career began much like the first half ended, with professional disappointments. Rather than posting Cooke to one of the western garrisons occupied by the Second Dragoons, the army sent him to Carlisle Barracks to assume the post of Superintendent of Cavalry Recruiting Services – where he remained on detached duty until 1852. After four years in Pennsylvania, however, the major returned to the West. Exigencies within the regiment sent him to Fort Mason on the edge of the Staked Plains in central Texas. The new assignment was a welcome return to the duties and the environment he found so rewarding. Yet, following the war with Mexico, the nature of the army’s frontier mission had changed subtly, but significantly. Prior to the war, the missions executed by the army asserted the nation’s claim to its western frontier and contributed to its acquisition of the continent. In the aftermath of the war, the army became a constabulary force and the missions it executed were to tame the land and its people, and establish the sovereignty of the United States over the West. Yet, throughout the ensuing decade, Cooke, and the army, labored against the same constraints and prejudices that characterized military service throughout the nineteenth century.

In spite of recognition by authorities in Washington that the regular army bore the greatest responsibility for the victory over Mexico, the army as a whole continued to be underfunded, undermanned, overburdened, and unappreciated considering the scope of the duties with which it was charged. The nation acquired more than a million square miles of territory from Mexico, but the government refused to sustain the size of its wartime force, and following ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, reduced the army to its prewar levels: a mere
9,852 officers and enlisted men. The longstanding view that a large peacetime army constituted a threat to national liberty remained firmly implanted in the psyche of the American people and their political representatives.¹

In spite of these obstacles, Cooke persevered. Braced by two and a half decades of service and experience, Cooke recognized the important role the army played in the development of the country. By the midpoint of his career, he had witnessed the growing emigration of Americans into the westernmost sections of the Old Northwest Territory; the removal of thousands of eastern tribesmen into Indian Territory; the drive of entrepreneurs into the pueblos of New Mexico and the cool-mountain streams of the Rockies; as well as the first wave of pioneers into Oregon and California. The principles of “Manifest Destiny” were already a reality to Cooke long before John O’Sullivan coined the iconic phrase. It was inevitable that the people and institutions of the United States would overspread the continent, and experience demonstrated that the army would be central to future expansions.

Setbacks, however, continued to plague Cooke. While stationed in Texas, he experienced firsthand the extreme contempt with which the public could hold the military and its representatives. Months after the major arrived, he learned the people of Texas had not forgotten his role in the humiliation of “Snively’s Invincibles” a decade earlier, nor had they forgiven him. During the spring of 1853, disgruntled Texans began sending letters that threatened the dragoon officer’s life. While Cooke likely disregarded the initial threats of violence, as time passed, he became convinced his life was actually in jeopardy. Declaring he had been “exposed to plots and attempts of assassination,” Cooke wrote the Second Dragoons’ commanding officer, Colonel William S. Harney, to request an immediate transfer. Fortune was with the anxious Cooke. During the summer, the aging Nathan Boone resigned his commission as the Second Dragoons’
lieutenant colonel, not only opening an opportunity for Cooke to advance in rank but the chance to assume command of another frontier outpost.

In the brief span of years since the end of the Mexican War, the army expanded its network of fortifications to guard the major transportation lines connecting East with West. In 1851, the army established Fort Union in New Mexico Territory to guard the western branches of the Santa Fe Trail. Located on Coyote Creek near the intersection of the Cimarron Cutoff and the Mountain Branch of the trail, Fort Union served as a supply depot and a critical link in the transportation network used by the military and civilians for shipping goods into the Southwest. From its guardian’s perch, the instillation also served as a base for numerous military operations against various Native American tribes throughout the region. In the spring of 1854, after being promoted to lieutenant colonel of the Second Dragoons, Cooke assumed command of the New Mexico outpost. Yet, following the Mexican War, other changes impacting the army’s role in the expanded western frontier affected Cooke. The army no longer controlled Indian affairs, and Cooke quickly discovered the aggravations of dealing with federal Indian agents working for the newly established Department of the Interior. Their attempts to induce the territory’s warring Indian populations into signing treaties establishing tribal boundaries troubled Cooke. These tribes, especially the Navajo and Apache, had never been conquered and Cooke believed such efforts would prove futile. Yet Cooke and his opinions were now subordinate in Indian affairs to directives from the Interior Department.²

Events in the spring of 1854 finally freed Cooke’s hands. In March, Cooke launched an expedition against the treaty-resisting Jicarilla Apaches after they killed twenty-two dragoons and wounded thirty-six others in a skirmish near Cieneguilla. Doggedly pursuing the Indians for more than a week, Cooke and his dragoons fell on their prey near the Rio Caliente.
ensuing fight Cooke’s troops destroyed the Jicarilla village, captured precious supplies, and sent survivors scattering into the still winter-bound mountains. Cooke’s tenacity during the chase and coolness during the skirmish earned him the respect of no less than Kit Carson, who served as one of the expedition’s guides. Carson later declared that the dragoon commander was as “efficient an officer to make campaigns against Indians as I ever accompanied . . . . That he is brave and gallant all know.”

The next year, 1855, the army transferred Cooke to another guardian post established in 1853 midway between the Santa Fe Trail and the Overland Road: Fort Riley in Kansas Territory. The army sent Cooke to Kansas to take command of the mounted division of the Sioux Expedition led by the Second Dragoons’ commanding officer, Colonel William S. Harney. The purpose of the expedition was to chastise Lakota warriors for depredations committed along the Overland Road following their “massacre” of Lieutenant John L. Grattan and twenty-nine soldiers near Fort Laramie the previous August. Throughout the summer, Cooke’s dragoons made regular patrols between Forts Riley and Laramie to prevent Lakota warriors from closing the road, and ensuring the safety of wagon-bound emigrants and freighting operations. Harney’s operation culminated in September, when he attacked the Brule village of Little Thunder at Ash Hollow on Blue Water Creek. Before the battle began, Cooke led four companies of dragoons into a concealed location overlooking the village prior to the attack. At dawn, when the roar of Harney’s cannon signaled the beginning of the battle, Cooke launched his dragoons with devastating effect. They inflicted seventy-four casualties on the fleeing Indians, and when combined with the damages inflicted by Harney’s division, the southern Lakota tribes inhabiting the Platte Valley were awed into relative submission for several years to come.
The constabulary missions executed by Cooke after the Mexican War, however, were not limited to Indians contesting the western expansion of the United States. When a guerrilla war erupted between “Free Soil” advocates and pro-slavery adherents in Kansas Territory following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, Cooke, who remained in command at Fort Riley, used his dragoons to execute the government’s policy of neutrality and stand firmly between the partisans to help end the bloodshed. Between the fall of 1855 and September 1857, Cooke repeatedly prevented attempts to escalate the violence. During the late summer of 1856, for example, Cooke refused to obey orders from pro-slavery governor Robert Walker to attack the Free Soil town of Topeka. Days later, he and his dragoons prevented a force of Free Soil partisans following James H. Lane from sacking the pro-slavery territorial capital of Lecompton.

The following July, he deployed his dragoons around the Free Soil stronghold of Lawrence to contain a “revolutionary” movement there. While Cooke found the policy of using the military to police citizens personally distasteful, he also opposed the fratricidal warfare spreading through the territory over the issue of slavery.5

Cooke’s quarantine of Lawrence was lifted in the fall of 1857, following the expulsion of federal appointees from Utah Territory on orders of Brigham Young and leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In spite of the late season, Cooke led six companies of the Second Dragoons on a brutal, bone-chilling march across the Overland Road to escort Alfred Cummings into Utah to assume the territorial governorship from the LDS president. While Cooke did little more than herd the livestock belonging to General Albert Sidney Johnston’s Utah Expedition, the presence of the dragoons added strength to the two thousand regulars surrounding the Mormon capital of Salt Lake City and aided in efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the insurrection.6
In the aftermath of the “Mormon War,” Cooke remained in Utah. On June 14, 1858, Cooke received promotion to colonel and was placed in command of the Second Dragoons. Yet, news of his promotion was offset by his despondency over being ordered to garrison Camp Floyd in the Cedar Valley; forty miles outside Salt Lake City. Cooke decided the army was “searching for the most complete desert to be found in which to establish a permanent camp.” Fortunately, in the wake of the restored peace with the Mormons, the army granted Cooke an extended furlough to return east and visit family.

Securing an extension of his leave, in the fall of 1858, Cooke traveled to the East Coast. While in New York City, he visited the office of General Winfield Scott, who broached the subject of Cooke translating an 1826 French cavalry manual in hopes of creating an official manual for the United States Cavalry. It was an idea that appealed to Cooke. A student of his craft, Cooke had studied foreign cavalry manuals since his transfer into the First Dragoons in 1833. Initially his efforts were aimed at the development of drill and tactical maneuvers for the regiment, and undoubtedly served the dragoons well as they worked to develop training routines. Yet, scattered along the frontier, the dragoons never established a uniform training system. Perhaps the closest the First Dragoons came to a uniform training program was in 1840, when Colonel Kearny appointed Cooke as the regimental drillmaster at Fort Leavenworth. Cooke’s continued dedication to the study of the cavalry arts undoubtedly led him to refine the drills practiced by the dragoons on the parade field and contributed to the spread of the regiment’s reputation as one of the army’s elite units.

Cooke had continued to study foreign cavalry manuals as a hobby, a practice well known to Scott, and evidence suggests he translated several foreign language volumes throughout his career. Combined with his successes in the West, Cooke’s hobby also established his reputation
as one of the premier cavalry officers in the country. At Scott’s urgings Secretary of War J. B. Floyd invited Cooke to translate the French manual as the basis for an American manual. As the cavalry force in the United States was considerably smaller than those employed in Europe, Scott directed that the French manual be scaled down from divisional formations to that of brigades.  

Cooke accepted the challenge, and with the exception of a quick trip to Europe, worked on the translation through the fall of 1859. In October, after completing the initial draft of his manuscript, he requested permission to relocate to Carlisle Barracks to test his theories and revised tactics by animating them with the recruits at the cavalry depot. By January 1860, he notified the War Department that he had refined his exercises, completed his manuscript, and needed only to complete the necessary sketches. The new manual, *Cavalry Tactics, or Regulations for the Instruction, Formations, and Movements of the Cavalry of the Army and Volunteers of the United State*, was quickly adopted by War Department and remained the army’s official cavalry manual until 1883. Often cited as a classic military work, Cooke’s manual accomplished its objectives by creating systems of drill that allowed for the evolution of formations at several levels of troop strength: from small squadrons to full regiments and beyond. As one historian noted, it was also “a remarkable and wholesome departure from previous practices, for it set the United States Cavalry free . . . to evolve its own answers to the problems of strategy, unhampered by the necessity of performing a like service tactically.”

During the summer of 1860, Cooke received orders to return to Utah. Although designated to command the Department of Utah, the colonel found no joy in his posting and quickly returned to the sour state that characterized his demeanor following the Mormon War. Heightening his troubles, shortly after returning to Camp Floyd, the sectional rift over the future of slavery flared following the nomination of Illinois’ Abraham Lincoln as the Republican
Party’s nominee for president. Triggering threats of secession by southern states should Lincoln win the election, the Virginia-born Cooke, like so many other southern officers, became the target of suspicion—in spite of repeated declarations that he was a Union man. Even the secession of his home state in the spring of 1861 could not sway Cooke’s loyalty. Finally, after a family member asked what side he would support in the coming conflict, Cooke responded in an open letter that he no longer considered himself a Virginian. Although he cherished his connection to the Old Dominion, he had become a “Western man.” Furthermore, the Union had provided him with an education and a profession, and he would not dishonor its trust by following the “cold, selfish conspirators and traitors” his native state had joined in treason.  

Civil War finally erupted in April 1861, and three months later, Cooke received orders to close the Department of Utah and return east with its personnel. It would be the last time Cooke led troops across the continent. Yet, in light of the pain he endured during the war, such considerations held little meaning. The Cookes, like so many American families, were torn apart by the Civil War. Although Cooke chose to remain loyal to the Union, John Rogers and both of his son-in-laws—including Flora’s husband John Ewell Brown “Jeb” Stuart—decided to stand with Virginia in the Confederacy. When Cooke learned of their actions, he reportedly shouted, “Those mad boys!”, then lamented, “If only I had been here!”

Arriving in Washington, D.C. in November, Cooke received a brigadier general’s commission and was appointed commander of the Reserve Brigade of Cavalry for the Army of the Potomac. Although eager to defend his nation, and see the Republic restored, the war proved disastrous for Cooke. During the Peninsula Campaign of 1862, Cooke suffered two professional blows that nearly destroyed his reputation by making him vulnerable to accusations of harboring southern sympathies. First, Cooke failed to engage and destroy a Confederate cavalry force led
by his son-in-law Stuart that brazenly rode a circle around the army of the Potomac as it approached Richmond. Then, following the Union defeat at the battle of Gaines’ Mill, Major General Fitz-John Porter scapegoated Cooke for the disaster. Porter accused Cooke of launching an ill-conceived and poorly timed cavalry charge that spread panic through the Union line and triggered the rout. Both accusations were foolish and undeserved. The first incident demonstrated McClellan’s inability to effectively utilize cavalry. Rather than simply dispatching Cooke’s brigade to stop Stuart, McClellan attached infantry to Cooke’s command and ordered them to move in unison. Saddled with foot soldiers, it was impossible for Cooke to catch his son-in-law. At Gaines’ Mill, Porter ignored the fact that rebels under the command of General John Bell Hood already had shattered the Union line and Cooke’s charge had been the only defensive measure taken to delay the Confederate rout.11

Embittered by the whispered accusations that disparaged his commitment to the Union, Cooke resigned from his command of the Reserve Brigade of Cavalry. Remaining in the army, however, he served on various boards and performed reconstruction duties until transferred to New York City to fill the post as superintendent of Recruiting Services in 1864. These were difficult pills for Cooke to swallow. In spite of repeated requests to be reassigned to a battlefield command, the army refused to return Cooke to the front lines. But professional setbacks were not the only difficulties endured by the former cavalry commander. Through the war, Cooke undoubtedly learned of the numerous, and often serious, battle wounds suffered by his son, Brigadier General John Rogers Cooke. Then, in May 1864, Cooke received news that Flora’s husband, his beloved son-in-law, Major General “Jeb” Stuart was killed at the Battle of Yellow Tavern. While Cooke never regretted his decision to honor his commitment to the Union, his choice to stand against Virginia and the Confederacy caused divisions within his family that
lasted for decades after the war’s end. He and John Rogers did not reconcile their relationship until 1883, and while inconclusive, evidence indicates that it was nearly a decade before Flora forgave her father.¹²

In the aftermath of the war, Cooke’s fortunes as a soldier continued to decline. In 1866, the frontier veteran was named to command the Department of the Platte. Joyously accepting the orders, General Cooke moved to the bustling community of Omaha, Nebraska that spring. Expecting a quiet tour of duty, Cooke paid little attention to reports from Fort Laramie detailing the departure of an Oglala war chief named Red Cloud from treaty negotiations that spring. The negotiations had been successful, and according to the government’s agents, the Lakota agreed to allow the construction of a wagon road through the Powder River Valley and the establishment of three forts along its course. Throughout the summer and fall, however, the department commander received conflicting reports regarding the temperament of the Lakota. Then, in December, Cooke learned that a detachment of ninety-six soldiers under the command of Lieutenant William J. Fetterman from the recently established Fort Phil Kearny were lured into an ambush and wiped out. It was the worst defeat suffered by the U.S. Army at the hands of Native Americans since St. Clair’s Defeat in 1791.¹³

Although he immediately ordered his district commander, Colonel Henry Carrington to mount an aggressive winter campaign against Red Cloud’s Lakota warriors, within three weeks of the “Fetterman Massacre,” Cooke learned he was to be replaced as department commander. In a letter dated January 28, 1867, Lieutenant General William Tecumseh Sherman, commander of the Division of the Missouri, informed Cooke that Colonel (Brevet Major General) Christopher C. Augur had been appointed. While assuring Cooke that he bore no blame for the Fetterman disaster, Sherman explained that the army’s commanding general, Lieutenant General
Ulysses S Grant, had selected Augur because he was younger and believed to be better able to take the field against Red Cloud’s warriors. Once Augur arrived in Nebraska, Cooke left the West for the last time as an officer in the U.S. Army.\textsuperscript{14}

At age 57, Cooke was aware that his days of commanding troops on the frontier were over. Not yet ready to resign his commission, however, Cooke remained in the army another five years and did not retire until October 29, 1873. Stationed in Detroit, Michigan, in 1870 as the commander of the Department of the Lakes, Cooke found a home in which he and Rachel could spend their golden years. In the forty-three years the couple had been married, it was the first home they had ever purchased. Yet, in retirement, Cooke remained exceptionally active. In 1878, the general published a second memoir chronicling his experiences in the war with Mexico. He also wrote several magazine and newspapers articles detailing his opinions on matters of the day, including military affairs and assimilationist programs for Native Americans. He and Rachel also made frequent trips around the country to visit their children following their reconciliations. Cooke also collected the accolades of a nation grateful for his lifetime of military service. The University of Michigan granted Cooke an honorary masters of arts degree, and he was a highly regarded member of the Aztec Society and the Loyal Legion. As with all men, time eventually caught up with Cooke and, on March 20, 1895, he died quietly in his sleep. He was eighty-five.\textsuperscript{15}

Philip St. George Cooke is frequently remembered as the “Father of the United States Cavalry,” however the services he provide the country as an officer in the United States Army go well beyond the duties he performed as a member of the dragoons. Cooke entered the army at a time when the Republic was only just beginning to feel its way out of the Mississippi Valley and onto the prairies, plains, deserts, and mountains that lay beyond in the American West. The
movement of people and commerce into these regions presented the new arrivals from the East with, what was for them, exotic encounters with new landscapes, plant and animal life, and peoples belonging to diverse cultures vastly different from their own. The newness and vastness of it all created an environment that conclusively demonstrated that the army—like the nation it served—must expand. It was the only division of the federal government capable of performing the myriad duties necessary to ensure the safety of emigrants, to gather and relay information on the land and its peoples, to lay the foundations of infrastructure, to implement and defend national policies, as well as protect the nation’s borders. These frontier missions required the officers charged with their execution to demonstrate incredible intelligence and flexibility. They needed to be diplomats and conquerors, scholars and frontiersmen, explorers and nation builders.

Cooke was emblematic of the new class of officer leading the rank and file of the nineteenth-century army. As a graduate of the military academy, Cooke was among the ever-expanding number of West Point-educated officers holding commissions in the army. Like them, he entered military service armed with not only a broad scholastic background, but a firm grounding in the philosophies, doctrines, and practices established by the greatest military thinkers to that point in history. Unlike so many other graduates, however, Cooke represented that caliber of officer who believed their career choice was an honorable pursuit and worked to cultivate the professionalization of the profession of arms. As demonstrated, once he transferred into the First Dragoons, Cooke studied the cavalry arts and was instrumental in the development of the drills and tactics used by the regiment. Then, under the tutelage of senior officers like Stephen Watts Kearny, Cooke learned the value of the time-honored military practice of instilling discipline in his soldiers through rigorous training and the enforcement of regulations. Combined, these attributes allowed Cooke to develop a reputation as a stern taskmaster and strict
disciplinarian—characteristics that also allowed Cooke to become a standout officer within a regiment considered to be among the army’s elite.

Cooke built his reputation by utilizing these characteristics in the execution of his duties prior to the start of the Mexican War. By 1843, his development as an officer instilled his commanding officer, Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, with the confidence to assign Cooke as the commander of the four companies escorting the spring caravan crossing the plains to Santa Fe. During the escort, Cooke’s maturity allowed him to make critical decisions that ensured the success of the mission. The young captain did not allow his command to be compromised by the insecurities of the civilian merchants. While marching ahead of the caravan, Cooke allowed his force to move independently and gather intelligence without burden or delay. When the dragoons finally discovered the Texas privateers command by Colonel Jacob Snively, Cooke’s maturity also afforded him the ability to ensure the safety of the Santa Fe traders, while also avoiding a major international incident. Rather than attack the concealed Texans, the captain coolly requested a parley with Snively in hopes of achieving a peaceful resolution to the encounter with these men who were essentially pirates from the perspective of the American officer. While Cooke ultimately found it necessary to deploy his three companies of dragoons and two pieces of artillery in line of battle to convey the superior strength of his force, the discipline inculcated by the captain prevented any carelessness that might have led to the slaughter of the concealed Texans who were hesitant to surrender.

These characteristics also allowed Cooke to enhance his reputation during the Mexican War. Kearny demanded Cooke’s transfer to the Army of the West because of his proven skill and abilities as an officer. Yet the greatest demonstration of the general’s confidence was found in the missions assigned Cooke once he joined the Army of the West. Kearny selected Cooke to
escort merchant James Magoffin to Santa Fe because he needed an officer with the delicate skills of a diplomat to meet with the Mexican governor, as well as an officer who possessed the ability to assess the military strength of the Mexican forces and locate positions where the enemy might offer battle should the mission fail. Later, Kearny assigned Cooke command of the Mormon Battalion because he possessed the skill to take a raw group of potentially mutinous recruits and transform them into soldiers capable of crossing an unknown desert.

Cooke added to his reputation by supporting Kearny in California during the mutiny staged by the recklessly ambitious Lieutenant Colonel John C. Frémont. Trained in the law and intimately familiar with military regulations, Cooke recognized the illegitimacy of Frémont’s claims and threw his lot in with Kearny. Cooke gained additional accolades for his judicious conduct during his encounters with members of Frémont’s California Battalion. As commander of the Southern District of the Tenth Military Department, Cooke would have been within his rights to forcibly seize the artillery pieces held at the San Gabriel Mission. Yet, he was equally aware that any clash between American troops might provide the spark needed to ignite another revolt by the Mexican population. Rather than jeopardize the American position on the West Coast, Cooke restrained his passions. While prepared to restrict the movement of the California Battalion, Cooke allowed the situation to evolve until Kearny gained the upper hand in California and brought the mutiny to its conclusion. Ultimately Cooke’s actions in California validated a principle central to American democracy: the military was subordinate to the President of the United States and subject to obey his order under penalty of treason.

In many respects, had Cooke resigned his commission following the Mexican War, his exploits during the proceeding twenty-one years would have established him as a legendary figure in the military history of the United States. Yet, Cooke remained in the army for another
quarter century and added to his renown as a western military figure. In spite of shortcomings suffered during the Civil War and afterward, the reputation Cooke established through his accomplishments survived and served as a foundation upon which later generations built their own. Through his efforts to professionalize the service, to perfect its operations through study and practice, Cooke stood as an example of the soldier-scholar and was worthy of emulation by those who followed. Throughout his career, Cooke consistently refrained from the use of violence until no alternative existed. Aware that the uniform he wore made him a representative of the United States government, Cooke resolved to be the image of professionalism in the execution of his duties. Through forty-six years of uninterrupted military service, Cooke literally followed the flag across the continent as part of the vanguard of western expansion, and through his participation in frontier missions executed by the army he significantly influenced the role played by the army in the settlement of the continent.16

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1 Durwood Ball, *Army Regulars on the Western Frontier, 1848-1861* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), xx. Necessity throughout the decades forced the government to increase the size of the army to meet the many challenges it faced, especially in the West. By 1860, the government nearly doubled the size of the army to 18,615 officers and enlisted men, adding two infantry and two cavalry units. Of course these figures only reflect the number of troops authorized by Congress. As had been the case throughout the nineteenth century, the ranks of the service were never filled to capacity.


7 Young, Cooke, 317.


As quoted in Young, Cooke, 323.


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