

2014

## Without a Trace: The Becknell Five

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### Recommended Citation

Crease, Craig. "Without a Trace: The Becknell Five." *Wagon Tracks* 28, 4 (2014). [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/wagon\\_tracks/vol28/iss4/11](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/wagon_tracks/vol28/iss4/11)

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## Without a Trace:

### *An Inquiry Into the Peculiar Circumstance of the Missing Identities of the Becknell Five*

By Craig Crease

Gregory: "Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

Gregory: "The dog did nothing in the night-time."

Holmes: "That was the curious incident."

Sherlock Holmes, *Silver Blaze*, 1892

The rich panoramic history of the Santa Fe Trail has produced many thrilling and compelling episodes for historians and writers. Yet there are a few mysteries that remain, gaps in the historical record that demand investigation. Probably the most interesting, and important, of those remaining mysteries involves the very first trip on the Santa Fe Trail by the man who is commonly acknowledged to have forged the original trace in 1821, William Becknell.<sup>1</sup>

The mystery is that the five men who made this famous landmark voyage across the prairie with Becknell are unknown to history, missing from the historical record, glaring by their omission from it. This article seeks to stimulate further study into this mystery, in the hope that armed with what is known, the historical detective can finally uncover the unknown....the missing identities of the Becknell Five.

The foundation of study for Becknell's 1821 seminal journey is the journal of that trip and Becknell's 1822 trip as published in the *Missouri Intelligencer* of April 22, 1823.<sup>2</sup> Here is the first of a subset of mysteries surrounding Becknell. Did he even write the journal? Becknell was known at that time as smart and savvy, but with limited formal education.<sup>3</sup> His known letters reveal simple phonetic spelling and short declarative sentences.<sup>4</sup> Yet his journal as printed in the *Missouri Intelligencer* is full of poetic imagery and written in a sophisticated and descriptive style quite different than that of Becknell. Add to that conundrum the fact that the location of the original journal manuscript is unknown; all reprints of the journal have been taken from the *Missouri Intelligencer*. To add further spice to the mystery brew, the esteemed *Missouri Historical Review* published the journal in 1911 as written by "Thomas Becknell".<sup>5</sup>

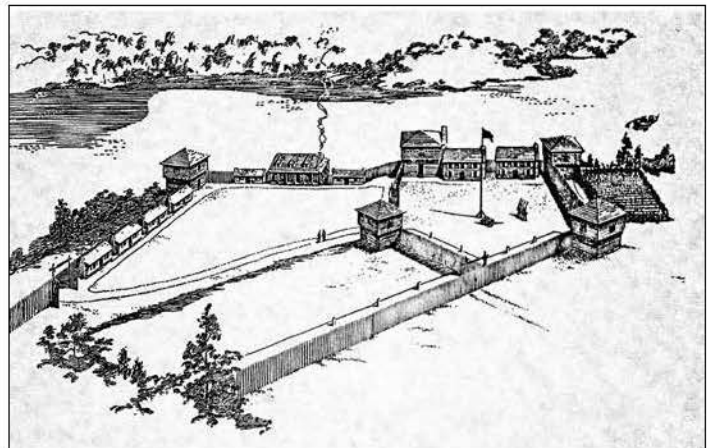
It seems possible, but not totally conclusive, that the editor of the *Missouri Intelligencer*, Nathaniel Patten, re-wrote some written journal of Becknell's and elaborated on Becknell's simple and circumspect writing. It is even more likely that the journal as printed in the *Intelligencer* is a combination of Becknell's written dates, distances, and observations taken on the 1821 trip, supplemented and expanded by editor Patten through a face-to-face interview with Becknell upon

his return. This is supported by editor Patten's comments several months before the publication of Becknell's "journal" in the *Missouri Intelligencer*; "We are promised by Capt. B. that in a few weeks he will furnish us with such information relative to Santa Fe as will be useful and entertaining to our readers."<sup>6</sup> Note there is no mention of a diary or a journal, just "information." So this mystery remains to be solved, and perhaps only will be if and when Becknell's original manuscript journal finally shows up, assuming that it ever existed at all.



The only contemporary account of Becknell comes from the pen of George Sibley, who knew him well. "William Becknell," Sibley wrote in 1825, "a man of good character, great personal bravery, & by nature & habit hardy and enterprising. His pursuit, immediately previous to his first trip to Sta Fee was, as I am informed, that of a salt maker. He certainly had no knowledge of mercantile concerns, & tho' very shrewd and intelligent, very deficient in education".<sup>7</sup> Certainly not the description of a man who might be unaware of or indifferent to his place in history.

Becknell was certainly self-aware that the 1821 journey itself was historically important. In 1825 he wrote matter-of-factly in a letter remembering the time, "I forged the trail to Santa Fe."<sup>8</sup> He was acknowledged as the father of the Santa Fe Trail by Josiah Gregg in 1844 with the publication of the *Commerce of the Prairies*, Gregg's influential book that, more than any other, created the public perception of the history of the trail's hey-day throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.<sup>9</sup> He was eulogized in 1856 in the *Clarksville Northern Standard* by editor Charles De Morse: "Capt. Becknell was the first to cross the plains to Santa Fe.... The old man eloquent delighted till the close of his life, to relate the events con-



Becknell and his five men set out from Fort Osage in September 1821 on their historic trip.

*nected with the first settlement of Missouri. . . . We knew Capt. Becknell well for many years. He was a man of decided character, great strength [?] and firmness – a model of a pioneer.*<sup>10</sup>

Eloquent he may have been, yet we have no written follow-up from Becknell after the *Missouri Intelligencer's* publication of his journals. No interviews from journalists in the frontier press recalling in detail the historic days of 1821. Even the files of the *Clarksville Northern Standard*, the influential northern Texas newspaper that covered Clarksville and the Red River country that was Becknell's home for the last twenty-one years of his life, are void of any reminiscences by Becknell or reporting on the 1821 trip to Santa Fe. No other old-age journals or diaries or interviews. Nothing from Becknell for the thirty-five years that he lived beyond the historic 1821 seminal journey. How curious that a man who obviously knew contemporarily his place in history, never seemed to publicly tell his story again. Just as curious that no one ever seemed to ask him much about it in later years. So the record from Becknell himself remains perplexingly incomplete. There is not even a known verifiable photo of him.



The number of men with Becknell in 1821 was its own mystery, a point of conjecture until the 1992 discovery by Michael Olsen and the late Harry Myers of the diary of Pedro Ignacio Gallego. This was the Mexican officer leading troops who encountered Becknell and his group near Kearny Gap just south of present-day Las Vegas, New Mexico. Gallego's diary makes it clear that Becknell was traveling with just five men.<sup>11</sup> For years historians had speculated on how many men went with Becknell. It was estimated as many as 30 men made the trip. Alphonso Wetmore, writing about it in 1832, just eleven years after the event, stated that Becknell took 21 men with him on that first trip.<sup>12</sup> (Wetmore was probably confusing it with Becknell's 1822 trip.) Josiah Gregg got it almost right in 1844, when he pegged it at four men with Becknell. Historian Louise Barry, through serendipitous luck or historical instinct (she had access to the same limited information that everybody else had, but no more) nailed it in 1972 when she wrote "*Led by William Becknell, five men with goods-laden pack animals left Franklin, MO, September 1 on a trading trip to the Comanche country.*"<sup>13</sup>

Today we know without a doubt, from the empirical evidence provided by the Gallego diary, that there were indeed just five men with Becknell. We also know from the contemporary record including Becknell's journal as published in 1823, that he left some or most of his five men behind when he returned to the Missouri frontier in December, 1821. "*My company concluded to remain at St. Michael,*" Becknell wrote, "*except Mr. M'Laughlin, and we left that village December 13.*"<sup>14</sup> Alphonso Wetmore wrote in 1825 that on the 1821 trip Becknell "*returned in the following December and January, having left one or two of his party behind him.*"<sup>15</sup>

If it seems incredible that such a historic event as the 1821 journey was pretty well ignored by Becknell in his later years, it is even more surprising that the five men who forged the Santa Fe Trail with Becknell in 1821 should be so indifferent to the notoriety and fame of being on that trip. Yet, like their 1821 leader, the five are silent. The slate is blank but for a few clues. Their names just do not appear in the known record.

But there are clues, a few sketchy and ambiguous clues, that lead to more than a few suspects. At one time or another, some of these suspects have been proposed by various historians as possible members of the Becknell Five. Some are shown here for consideration for the first time. Consider the evidence, or lack of, in support of these men being the ones historians seek. In no particular order, and giving their estimated age on the 1821 trip (Becknell was 33), the suspects are:

### Mr. M'Laughlin – Age unknown

We start with this paradox; we actually know the last name of one of the men on the 1821 trip, yet we know nothing else about him. Period. Becknell's journal stated, "*My company concluded to remain at St. Michael, except for Mr. M'Laughlin, and we left the village December 13 on our return home.*"<sup>16</sup>

### Bailey Hardeman – Age 26

Another clue we get from Becknell concerns Bailey Hardeman. Appearing in the *Missouri Intelligencer* of June 25, 1825, was the "*Journal of Expedition From Santa Cruz To The Green River by Capt. Becknell,*" an article concerning Becknell's 1824–1825 trapping trip on the Green River "*several hundred miles from Santa Fe.*"



Becknell [?] wrote "*The young men employed by me had seen better days, and had never before been supperless to bed, nor missed a wholesome and substantial meal at the regular family hour, except one, who was with me when I opened the road to Santa Fe.*" Becknell goes on to describe Hardeman in the conclusion of this article in a familiar way: "*Mr. Bailey Hardeman, of this county, was to have set out on his return, accompanied by a large party, on the first of the present month.*"<sup>17</sup>

Here we have a bit of circumstantial evidence. Was Bailey Hardeman the one "*who was with me when I opened the road to Santa Fe*"? Becknell mentioned no other name in the article. Hardeman did leave Santa Fe for Missouri about June 1, 1825, possibly in a leadership role, in a wagon train that included Meredith M. Marmaduke and some 500 mules.<sup>18</sup>

Hardeman later had a role, like Becknell, in the early Texas Republic. But Bailey Hardeman's life and legacy was cut short when he died of a fever in 1836.

### Alexander Le Grand – About age 27

In May of 1824 Alexander Le Grand was the captain of the large caravan out of Howard County, Missouri, that numbered 83 men, including Meredith M. Marmaduke and Augustus Storrs. Alphonso Wetmore commented the following year on Le Grand and his role in that 1824 wagon train; *“Mr. Le Grand was appointed Caravanbachi, or head of the caravan. This gentlemen had resided some time in Santa Fe, and is well informed in the customs of the province. He is a young man of fine genius and liberal acquirements.”*<sup>19</sup>

Le Grand entered the historical record with this 1824 caravan, a virtual unknown up to that point. Yet he burst onto the scene as a full-fledged caravan captain. Is it coincidence that he had lived in Santa Fe for “some time” prior to heading up this train? His whereabouts are unknown in 1821 and 1822. As noted above, Becknell left most of his men in the Santa Fe area in the winter of 1821.

Le Grand is mentioned in a letter that Becknell wrote to Bartolomé Baca, the governor of New Mexico, in October 1824. Note the true style of Becknell's writing in this letter that was undeniably written by him: *“The preste of santa Clarar wishes to go to the united States with me next spring if it is agreabel to your Excelances. My Friend Mr. Lagrand will translat this to your oner. I shall cum an see you when I cum in from the woods.”*<sup>20</sup>

Because of the circumstantial evidence of Le Grand's time in Santa Fe, his sudden appearance in a position of great responsibility with the 1824 caravan indicating at the very least that he knew the route to Santa Fe, and because of his tie to Becknell in the above letter, Alexander Le Grand deserves consideration as possibly one of the Becknell Five.

### Ezekiel Williams – Age 46

Becknell had known Ezekiel Williams since at least 1817. Williams was probably the only Franklin-area citizen in 1821 who had been out to the far west and southwest. In 1811 Williams participated in a disastrous trip seeking the upper Arkansas River. He descended the Arkansas by himself in 1813. He returned again in 1814 to recover cached furs with his partners Braxton Cooper and Morris May.<sup>21</sup> He would have had empirical knowledge of the geography of the southwest that no one else would have had. Furthermore, it was at Ezekiel Williams' farm that Becknell had the potential adventurers meet in August 1821: *“...on the Missouri, about five miles above Franklin, where we will procure a pilot and appoint officers to the company.”*<sup>22</sup> Based on Becknell's familiarity with Williams, his first-hand and unique knowledge of the West and Southwest and the simple fact

that the expedition was organized at his home, all lend support that Ezekiel Williams should be considered as a suspect.

### Ira Emmons – Age Unknown

Becknell knew Ira Emmons since at least 1816, when Becknell and the Emmons brothers, Ira and Julius, entered into a partnership to deliver a keelboat from Cooper's Fort in the Boonslick area to Fort Osage on behalf of Joseph Robidoux III. The partnership apparently continued as late as 1819, when Becknell and the Emmons brothers engaged in part time local freighting.<sup>23</sup>

In 1825 Ira Emmons was George Sibley's first choice for captain and pilot of the entire survey crew of the federal government's first survey of the Santa Fe Trail, commonly known today as the Sibley Survey. *“In selecting a fit person to take the immediate charge of the men,”* George Sibley wrote to fellow survey commissioner Benjamin Reeves in May 1825, *“you will oblige me if you will take Mr. Ira Emmons into your consideration; he has been twice to St. Fee and once commanded a party; and I have been informed gave general satisfaction. Please to understand that I suggest this merely as an individual & not officially; for I leave the selection of this officer entirely to yourself; and am persuaded that I shall concur with you whether you appoint Mr. Bynum or Mr. Emmons. I shall be glad at any rate to have Mr. Emmons of the party if he can be induced to go for any employment we can offer him.”*<sup>24</sup>

Sibley considered Ira Emmons so valuable an addition to the survey expedition that he was willing to let him come along in almost any capacity. Becknell's long familiarity with Ira Emmons, coupled with the fact that just two years before Becknell's 1821 journey they were in a small local freighting business together, and supported by Sibley's active desire to hire Ira Emmons, over all others, to lead his men, indicate that Ira Emmons may well be one of Becknell's missing five from 1821.

### Gray Bynum – Age 29

Mentioned above by Sibley as a viable alternative to Ira Emmons to serve as leader of the survey team, Gray Bynum has no known record of ever having taken the Santa Fe Trail from Missouri to Santa Fe. At both the time of the 1821 journey and Sibley's letter of 1825 Bynum was Clerk of the Circuit Court of Howard County, Missouri. Sibley and Benjamin Reeves wanted a leader that had been to Santa Fe before. Ultimately the leader chosen was Stephen Cooper, who had been to Santa Fe several times; Bynum could not go, and Ira Emmons had already left for Santa Fe.<sup>25</sup> Sibley's preference for Gray Bynum makes no sense, unless possibly his leadership was so attractive to Sibley and Reeves because



he **had** been to Santa Fe...as one of the missing Becknell Five in 1821.

### Moses Carson – About age 24

Moses Carson, half-brother of Kit Carson, has been suggested by some historians as a possibility of being one of Becknell's 1821 men,<sup>26</sup> perhaps on the strength that he is a CARSON, and that his whereabouts are unknown for 1821 and 1822. There is a tie between Becknell and Moses Carson. In 1814-1815 they served together under Capt. Daniel Morgan Boone and his Mounted Rangers; Becknell as a sergeant and Carson as a private.<sup>27</sup>

### Thomas Becknell – Age unknown

Apparently Becknell did have a brother named Thomas.<sup>28</sup> Then there is that strange attribution of the Becknell journal to "Thomas Becknell" by the *Missouri Historical Review* in 1911.<sup>29</sup> Tenuous as this thread is, he remains as a suspect.

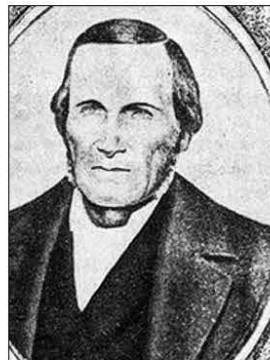
### Joseph R. Walker – Age 23

One of the greatest of the frontiersmen and mountain men, Joseph R. Walker roamed far and wide over the American west and southwest during his illustrious life. But did he go with Becknell in 1821 to Santa Fe? One Walker biographer speculated that Joseph Walker, (not Bailey Hardeman; see above) was the trapping companion in 1824 that Becknell singled out as one "...who was with me when I opened the road to Santa Fe."<sup>30</sup>



### William Wolfskill – Age 23

Wolfskill has been mentioned from time to time as one of the men who went to Santa Fe with Becknell in 1821, this supposition made mostly on the strength of the fact that he almost certainly did go on Becknell's second trip in 1822 when he led 21 men and three wagons. There are problems with this theory; for one thing, Becknell left most of his men behind in San Miguel in December 1821. For Wolfskill to have been on the 1822 trip also, he would have had to follow quickly after Becknell in an unrecorded trip back to Missouri in time to make the start of the return trip on May 22, 1822. Not probable, but not impossible.



### Ewing Young – Age 22

Ditto for Ewing Young. The same logic applied to Wolfskill above puts Young on the trail with Becknell in 1821. Same problem, however. Ewing Young would have had to make a similar quick and unrecorded journey back to Missouri to make the May 22 jump-off of Becknell's second trip to Santa Fe. Again, not impossible, but not probable.

### None of the above

It may be that the identities of none of the Becknell Five reside in the above list. A final lingering clue springs from Becknell's achingly sparse entry for his group's important stop at Fort Osage before heading out onto the prairie in 1821: "*Arrived at Fort Osage, we wrote letters, purchased some medicines, and arranged such affairs as we thought necessary previous to leaving the confines of civilization.*"<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the Becknell Five remain in obscurity because they lived in obscurity, leaving no record. Perhaps they were just indifferent to what they had accomplished. Maybe premature death took them before they had a chance to voice their involvement in the historic trip. Or maybe their legacy sits in the back vault of a Spanish archive, or in a trunk of letters in a Missouri attic. Time will tell. ♦

*Come Watson, Come! The Game is Afoot!*

### Endnotes

1. William Becknell was born in Virginia in about 1788. By 1810 he was on the Missouri frontier. His two historic trading trips to Santa Fe in 1821 and 1822 sealed his historic legacy as the founder of the Santa Fe Trail, especially the 1821 trip. Becknell moved to Texas in 1835, and served a key role in the Texas Republic. Becknell died on his farm near Clarksville, Texas in 1856. See Larry M. Beachum, *William Becknell, Father of the Santa Fe Trade* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1982).
2. "Journal Of Two Expeditions From Boone's Lick To Santa Fe," *Missouri Intelligencer*, April 22, 1823.
3. George Sibley to Owen Simpson, May 1, 1825, in Kate Gregg, *The Road To Santa Fe: The Journal and Diaries of George Champlin Sibley* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1952, 1995), 214-215.
4. See Becknell's letter of October 29, 1824 to Bartolomé Baca, Governor of New Mexico, Ritch Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Accessed online at <https://user.xmission.com/~drudy/mtman/html/becknell.html>.
5. "The Journals of Capt. Thomas Becknell from Boone's Lick To Santa Fe, and from Santa Cruz to Green River," *Missouri Historical Review* 4 (January 1910): 65-84.
6. *Missouri Intelligencer*, February 13, 1823.
7. Gregg, *Road to Santa Fe*, 214-215.
8. "Journal of Expedition From Santa Cruz To The Green River By Capt. Becknell," *Missouri Intelligencer*, June 25, 1825.
9. Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 13-15. Edited by Max L. Moorhead. There

have been numerous editions of Gregg's book since 1844.

10. *Clarksville Northern Standard*, April 26, 1856
11. Michael L. Olsen and Harry C. Myers, "The Diary of Pedro Ignacio Galgo Wherein 400 Soldiers Following the Trail of Comanches Met William Becknell on His First Trip to Santa Fe," *Wagon Tracks, Santa Fe Trail Association Quarterly* 7 (November 1992), 1, 15-20.
12. "Alphonso Wetmore's Report," in *Messages from the President on the State of the Fur Trade, 1824-1832* (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1985), 69-79.
13. Louise Barry, *The Beginning of the West, Annals of the Kansas Gateway to the American West, The Beginning of the West, 1540-1854* (Topeka, Kansas State Historical Society, 1972), 97.
14. "Journal of Two Expeditions. . .," *Missouri Intelligencer*, April 22, 1823.
15. Alphonso Wetmore to Congressman John Scott, August 19, 1824, in David A. White, *News of the Plains and Rockies, 1803-1865* (Spokane, WA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1996-2000), 2: 104.
16. "Journal of Two Expeditions. . .," *Missouri Intelligencer*, April 2, 1823.
17. "Journal of Expedition from Santa Cruz. . .," *Missouri Intelligencer*, June 25, 1825.
18. Barry, 121.
19. "Alphonso Wetmore's Report."
20. Becknell to Baca, Ritch Papers
21. Beachum, 19.
22. Beachum, 17.
23. Beachum, 11, 13.
24. Gregg, *Road to Santa Fe*, 219.
25. Gregg, *Road to Santa Fe*, 219.
26. Marc Simmons, "Remembering William Becknell, the Father of the Santa Fe Trail," "Trail Dust," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 9, 2005.

27. *Boone Pioneer Echoes, The Quarterly Publication of the Boone Family Association of Missouri*, 11 (July 1969): 22.

28. The existence of brother Thomas Becknell is more anecdotal than anything. Becknell biographer Larry M. Beachum (William Becknell) doesn't mention a brother named Thomas.

29. "The Journals of Capt. Thomas Becknell. . ."

30. Bil Gilbert, *Westering Man* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 80

31. "Journal of Two Expeditions. . .," *Missouri Intelligencer*, April 22, 1823.

Several writers have speculated that when Becknell and his men arrived at Fort Osage in September of 1821 they must have sought out and received the counsel of Dr. John Hamilton Robinson, the former travel partner of Zebulon Pike to Santa Fe in 1807. This cannot be true, however, because after several years of fomenting Mexican revolution since leaving his employment at Fort Osage, Dr. Robinson died of apparent yellow fever in September, 1819.

Images found at <https://images.google.com>

### Josiah Gregg Society

The Josiah Gregg Society honors individuals who notify the SFTA that they have made a planned gift to the SFTA. Planned gifts include, but are not limited to, naming the SFTA as a beneficiary through a bequest, charitable remainder trust, testamentary charitable remainder trust, insurance policy, retirement plan assets, charitable gift annuity, or reserved life estate.

SFTA thanks Bill and Susan Bunyan, Dianna Dunn and Margaret Sears for being part of this exclusive Society.

## Not Yet, But Plan Now

*By Larry Justice, SFTA membership chairman*

As you receive this issue of *Wagon Tracks*, let me remind you that the end of 2014 is just ahead. That means it is time to plan now to renew your membership. So, as we look to the beginning of 2015, let me encourage you to:

- Note SFTA renewal on your wall calendar
- Note SFTA renewal on your iPhone
- Note SFTA renewal on your iPad
- Note SFTA renewal at your next chapter meeting
- Note SFTA renewal to a fellow member of the Santa Fe Trail Association.

In addition, do you have a friend or acquaintance who would like to learn more about the Santa Fe Trail? Then, let me encourage you to:

- Invite that person(s) to a Chapter meeting

- Invite that person(s) to Symposium
- Invite that person(s) to join you to visit a local Santa Fe Trail site
- Invite that person(s) to fill out a membership form and send it in with the accompanying check
- Invite that person(s) to look for the "Santa Fe Trail" on Google Maps – particularly from Council Grove west.

You are the most important resource of the Santa Fe Trail Association. Your dues and your tax deductible contributions to the SFTA continue to make it possible to preserve the Trail for our children and grandchildren. Your financial support reinforces the goal of teaching others the value of the Trail in the 19th century as well as its effect upon the growth of our nation. "The Trail Lives On." Your membership makes that possible.

So, as we look toward a new year 2015, plan NOW to renew your membership in the Santa Fe Trail Association. ♦