

FIRST DRAFT

Colorado Rockies were an obstacle to Army gathering supplies for Utah War

In late February of 1858, Captain R.B. Marcy of the Fifth Infantry arrived at Fort Union, in eastern New Mexico, after a harrowing trip through the Colorado Rockies with a small troop of soldiers.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

To get there, he and his men had scabbled on hands and knees in deep snow to make a path for their worn-out horses and mules, had been forced to eat many of their animals to avoid starvation and had lost several pack animals as they descended from the top of the Book Cliffs to the Colorado River east of Grand Junction.

Their mission was to gather supplies for Army regiments stationed at Fort Bridger in preparation for what many believed would be a war between the United States and the Church of Latter Day Saints. The church was led by Brigham Young, who was also the federally appointed governor of Utah Territory.

Fort Bridger, now in southwestern Wyoming, was then a part of Utah Territory. It had begun as a fur-trading post operated by mountain men Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez. But the fur traders had been kicked out and the small fort became an outpost for the Mormon Militia.

In 1857, the U.S. Army under Gen. Albert Sidney Johnson, took control of the fort to use as a base of operations against the Mormons if war occurred.

But the retreating Mormons had burned most of the fort and Johnson's soldiers were forced to live in tents.

Normally, supplies for the fort could have come from places like Fort Leavenworth in Kansas.

But Mormons had reportedly attacked and destroyed supply trains headed to Fort Bridger over that route.

Johnson decided to look to Fort Union, southeast of Santa Fe in New Mexico Territory.

He appointed Captain Marcy as the head of a detachment of 40 enlisted men, 25 mountain men, packers and guides.

The chief guide was Jim Baker, friend of Jim Bridger and a man familiar with the Colorado mountains.

They left Fort Bridger on Nov. 24, 1857, where there were about 6 inches of snow on the ground.

"My guides, as well as other mountain men, were of the opinion that we should not, at that early season, find over two feet of snow upon the summit of the mountains," Marcy wrote in a memoir published a decade later.

The guides also said the detachment should reach Fort Massachusetts, at the southern end of the San Luis Valley, within 25 days.

Tension between the Mormons in Utah and the U.S. government had been simmering for some time before Marcy and his troops began their march toward Fort Union.

The reasons included U.S. objections to polygamy and the power of the Mormon theocracy in what was supposed to be a territory of the United States.

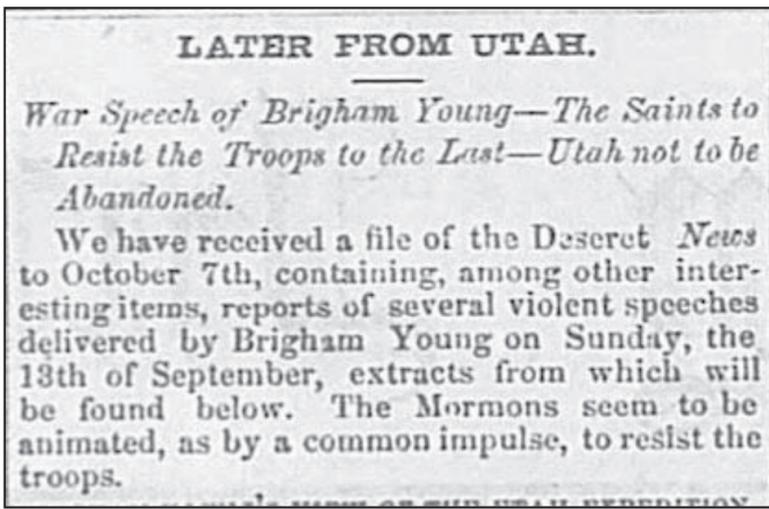
Things worsened in March 1857 when



Captain R.B. Marcy, as he appeared in later years. Marcy led the expedition through western Colorado to New Mexico.



Brigham Young, who was leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and governor of Utah Territory in 1857.



WHEELING DAILY INTELLIGENCER THROUGH NEWSPAPERS.COM.

A headline from a Virginia newspaper in December of 1857 highlighted views of many in the East toward Brigham Young and the Mormons.

William W. Drummond, a non-Mormon federal judge in Utah, resigned his post and claimed that the church and Brigham Young were responsible for murder, destruction of federal court records, harassment of federal officers, and slandering the federal government.

By July, President James Buchanan, who had made opposition to Mormons part of his 1856 election campaign, had ordered the Army's Utah Expedition to take the field against the Mormons.

In September, Brigham Young declared martial law in Utah and prohibited the U.S. Army from entering Utah Territory.

In the East, there were different views on the Utah War.

One newspaper in South Carolina opined that "The territory of Utah presents a spectacle of moral depravity and social degradation to which the annals of civilized man offer no parallel."

The paper urged President Buchanan to do everything possible to rid the nation of Mormons.

Others, such as the New York Daily Herald, suggested that war with the Mormons would be disastrous economically, militarily and would make the nation look bad in the eyes of the world.

The paper said Young's actions were "treasonable," but predicted the church would join Indian allies to overwhelm any U.S. forces sent against them.

No Colorado newspapers took up the cause because none existed then. It wasn't until the Gold Rush of 1859 that the first newspapers were established here.

It's no surprise that Mormons in Utah took exception to the decisions made in Washington.

The Deseret News declared in September, 1857 that "The principles of our Government are good, and they will ever be observed and sustained by the inhabitants of Utah."

But, it added, if a corrupt federal government persisted in attempting to enslave Utah residents, it would result in "the direst civil war upon record."

The paper reiterated its concerns in a lengthy editorial on Nov. 25, 1857, the day after Marcy and his troops departed Fort Bridger for New Mexico.

Exactly where Marcy's group traveled initially is unclear.

The captain wrote, "After leaving Fort Bridger, we proceeded down Henry's Fork to its confluence with Green River" at what's now Flaming Gorge Reservoir.

Then the command "followed a trail that led us to the foot of the mountain dividing Green River from Grand River (Colorado River)."

But there is no single mountain separating the two rivers.

The late historian, LeRoy Hafen, surmised that the party traveled through Brown's Park, in northwestern Colorado, which makes sense, since the park was already a well-known wintering spot for fur traders.

Next, Hafen said, Marcy's party followed "an ascending canyon for miles."

This may have been Canyon Pintado south of Rangely, which the Dominguez-Escalante expedition had traveled in the opposite direction 81 years earlier.

After many more miles of travel, the brigade "came upon the Roan, or Book Plateau," Hafen wrote.

Marcy wrote, "Our track led us across this elevated table-land, which we found terminating in a towering and almost perpendicular cliff or

bluff, bordering the valley of the Grand River and some two thousand feet above it."

They spent a night camped atop the escarpment, having cleared away 2 feet of snow for their tents, while Jim Baker searched for a route down the cliffs to the river below.

He found the trail he sought, and the next morning the entire party began a treacherous descent.

"Our pack mules had great difficulty in keeping their footing," Marcy wrote. "Occasionally, one of them would fall, and with his pack, roll over and over for thirty or forty feet down the rocks until he was brought up by a tree or projecting crag."

Neither Marcy nor Hafen offered a specific location for this descent off the Book Cliffs.

However, because Marcy's description is of a relatively narrow Grand River valley, it seems to have been east of De Beque Canyon.

Marcy said they were surprised and delighted to find plenty of green grass and no snow along the river.

Marcy's command had completed roughly half of its journey to Fort Union. The second half would be far more difficult.

My next column will discuss the completion of the journey and the end of the Utah War.

b

Sources: "Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border," by Randolph Barnes Marcy; "A Winter Rescue March Across the Rockies," by LeRoy R. Hafen, in *The Colorado Magazine*, January, 1927; *historic newspapers* at <https://newspapers.com> and *Utah Digital Newspapers* at <https://digitalnewspapers.org>.

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2022 THIS WEEK IN THE LEGISLATURE

DENVER — This week, the Colorado House is expected to act on a bill to ban openly carrying a firearm near a voting location.

Today: Legislature closed for Presidents' Day.

Tuesday: The Senate Local Government Committee is to hear SB2, a measure that would allow for compensating volunteer firefighters.

Wednesday: The Senate Business, Labor and Technology Committee is to debate SB113, which would create a special task force on artificial intelligence that would consider ways to restrict the use of facial recognition servers by state and local agencies and in public schools.

Thursday: The Senate Education Committee will consider three nominations to the Board of Trustees for Colorado Mesa University:

Charles Dukes of Commerce City, Timothy Fry of Grand Junction and Gary Reiff of Denver.

Next week: The House Agriculture, Livestock & Water Committee is to hear a measure (HB1148) introduced by Rep. Mark Catlin, R-Montrose, and Dylan Roberts, D-Eagle, to create a wildfire camera pilot program designed to help locate wildfires as they are starting.

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

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

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

— Charles Ashby

Fisherman falls through ice, dies

VERNAL, Utah — Authorities have recovered the body of a 52-year-old angler who fell through the ice on a reservoir in eastern Utah.

Uintah County sheriff's officials say Travis Hanchett, of Vernal, was fishing near the west inlet of Steinaker Reservoir when the ice broke Saturday morning. Emergency crews responded after witnesses heard the man yelling and saw his dog jump into the frigid water. The county's search and rescue team pulled the dog to safety, but Hanchett was found dead about an hour and a half later 10 feet under water.

— The Associated Press

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