

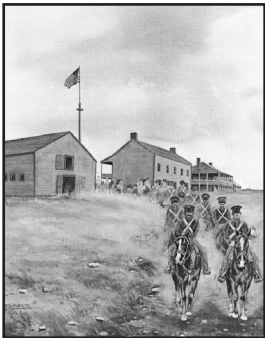
Fort Scott

National Park Service
Department of the Interior

Fort Scott National Historic Site



Manifest Destiny: The Dragoon Expeditions (1843-45)



“Dragoons Bound For Pawnee Country, 1844”
Artwork by Gary Hawk
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In the 1840s, westward expansion proceeded at a rapid pace. Promises of wide-open spaces and inexpensive land with rich soil enticed many people in the East to pack up their possessions and head West. As the population of Americans on the West Coast increased, so too did the nation’s desire to actually own the land that these Americans were settling. The phrase “Manifest Destiny” was coined to describe the philosophy shared by many that the United States had a divine right to become a transcontinental nation. To that end, the 1840s became a decade of rapid territorial acquisition and expansion.

Dragoon soldiers from Fort Scott participated in many activities that contributed to westward expansion. They provided armed escorts for parties on the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails, surveyed unmapped country, and maintained contact with Plains Indians. Each summer, from 1843-45, several companies of dragoons, including Company A, 1st U.S. Dragoons, from Fort Scott, participated in military expeditions. The purpose of these expeditions was to explore, to protect travel and trade along the overland trails, and to keep the Plains Indians at peace.

“Every man is in fine spirits, and even the horses seem to be delighted at their prospect of having many a fine roll and unconstrained gambol on the green prairies. It is indeed a noble body of troops.”
Lt. James Henry Carleton, commenting on the appearance of the dragoons prior to their departure on an expedition.

Trouble With Texans

The first of these expeditions took place along the Santa Fe Trail - a trade route between Missouri and Santa Fe - then part of Mexico. The United States Dragoons, organized in 1833, had been charged with protecting the traders along the trail from Indian attacks.

In 1843, trouble erupted along the Santa Fe Trail, not from Indian attacks but from Texans. Ill will existed between Texas and Mexico even before the Texan Revolution

of 1836. With prejudice and hatred on both sides, border squabbles and violence continued into the 1840s. In 1843, Texas “freebooters” began attacking Mexican caravans along the trail.

One group of Texans murdered Antonio Chavez, a Mexican trader, on American soil. The army apprehended and punished the killers but traders were fearful of further attacks and asked the Army to furnish a military escort along the trail that year.

Along the Santa Fe Trail later that year, Cooke wrote in his journal of the Chavez incident. *“Twas here that a cry to God, wrested by human fiends from a brother man, fell unanswered, - echoless on the desert air. It was here ... that human beings, eight or ten, fell upon a friendless one, and for vile pelf slew him! Here... was poor Chavis deliberately murdered...I hear his spirit mourning in the midnight storm...”*

“We are not on American soil”



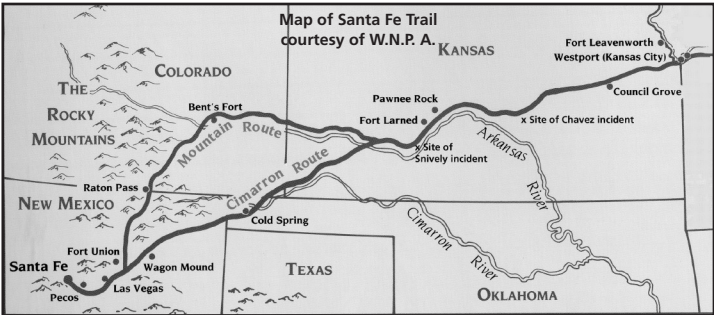
Artwork by Garry Embleton
Men at Arms 56
The Mexican American War 1846-48
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Captain Philip St. George Cooke led five companies of dragoons along the Santa Fe Trail to protect the trade. In route, the dragoons encountered Jacob Snively, who held a commission from Texas to raid Mexican caravans on Mexican soil. Two days prior, Snively’s men had attacked Mexican soldiers, killing several of them and taking their weapons.

Upon their initial encounter, Snively’s men and the dragoons were across the Arkansas River from each other. The land north of the river clearly belonged to the United States, but south of the river, U.S. territory only extended west to the 100th meridian.

Snively claimed that he was forty miles west of the boundary, but Cooke contended that Snively was on American soil. Therefore, he ordered Fort Scott’s dragoons, under Captain Terrett, to cross the river and disarm the freebooters. The dragoons left the freebooters only ten guns for defense on their way back to Texas. A rumor persists that the Texans had hidden their own guns and surrendered the previously confiscated Mexican weapons to the dragoons.

The 1843 expedition earned Captain Cooke the undying hatred of the Texans but was successful because it discouraged further attacks along the Santa Fe Trail that year.



Dragoons on Patrol



The year 1843 also saw the first significant migration over the Oregon Trail. To protect the emigrant traffic, the dragoons again went out on expeditions in 1844 and 1845. To strengthen security in the area and to end the fighting between the Pawnee and the Sioux, five companies of dragoons (including Company A from Fort Scott) traveled to Pawnee country in August of 1844. The next year, 1845, the dragoons met with the Sioux and other tribes during what is known as the South Pass expedition.

One of the purposes of the expeditions was to impress the Pawnee and Sioux with the strength of the dragoons. The soldiers came armed with sabers, breech-loading Hall's carbines, pistols, and two

mountain howitzers (cannons). The dragoons requested the Pawnee to make a truce with the Sioux and to refrain from horse stealing. The Pawnee, at first refused to comply. The dragoons left the Pawnee camp, but as they did so they fired their howitzers as a demonstration. The Pawnee were impressed and left the emigrant traffic alone for the next four years.

The Sioux met with the dragoons near Fort Laramie in 1845. They were equally awed by the firepower of the howitzers. They thought that the dragoons were "a new and superior kind of white people." They agreed to leave the emigrant traffic alone, if the emigrants behaved themselves.

A Pawnee brave known as Wild Warrior told the soldiers that ". . . *we have heard your advice about living at peace with our red brethren. It is good. Our ears are closed upon it. We wished peace . . . But the Sioux came down upon us and murdered our fathers, our mothers, our wives and our little ones . . . I thirsted for the blood of my enemies . . . One by one they felt the edge of my tomahawk . . . I have revenged my people . . . Wa-con-dah made me a great warrior . . .* "

"54° 40" or Fight"

Colonel Stephen Kearney commanded the South Pass expedition. He led the soldiers along the Oregon Trail to Fort Laramie and from there to South Pass, which they reached in June of 1845. This was the first time that an active U.S. military force traveled west of the Continental Divide.

An unstated purpose of the expedition was to place a military force near Oregon in the event of war with England. The United States and Great Britain both laid claim to all of the Oregon Territory and were unwilling to relinquish. 54° 40" was the line of latitude that marked the northern boundary of Oregon Territory.

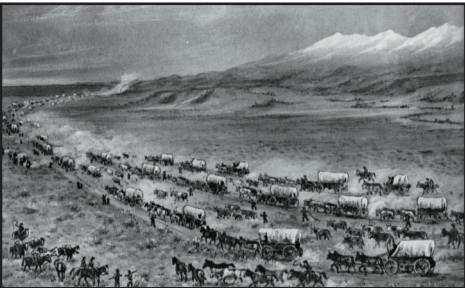
The war cry "54° 40" or Fight," heard during President Polk's presidential campaign, reflected the desire of some Americans to control all of Oregon or go to war.

The threat of war with Great Britain must have loomed large in Colonel Kearney's mind as he awaited further instruction at South Pass. He waited one day and with no word of war, he and his troops began their return journey

Compromise staved off conflict. The problem was solved by extending the existing boundary between the U.S. and Canada -the 49th parallel- to the Pacific Coast, which divided the Oregon Territory in two.

An interesting story involving Company A from Fort Scott, took place near Fort Laramie. As Kearney and his troops returned from South Pass, they were threatened by a prairie fire. In the words of Captain Cooke, "*We saw that it (Company A's camp) was nearly surrounded by fire. . . the fire progresses toward our little river bend and camp; and it is raging among the ancient cottonwoods . . . black billows of smoke roll forth, then a fierce gust or a whirlwind. . . It has crossed the stream and reached the dry grass of the central camp... we gallop forth to leap the girdling flame, and pass the blackened but still fiery space beyond.*" **Apparently, a soldier in Company A accidentally started the fire. One of the trappers accompanying the dragoons remarked that** "*another such expedition, and there will be no wood left in the country.*"

"A straight forward, simple and well-meaning people"



Emigrants going through South Pass
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While patrolling the Oregon Trail, the soldiers encountered several wagon trains heading west. This concerned the dragoons because the teams and herds of the wagon trains consumed the grasses as effectively as a prairie fire, leaving little for the dragoons' horses.

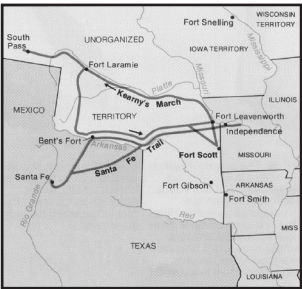
One dragoon officer praised the Oregon emigrants as a "straight forward, simple and well-meaning people." He reflected that the trip to Oregon would take a great deal of courage, energy and perseverance. For the most part, the relationship between the emigrants and the dragoons was mutually beneficial. The emigrants enjoyed the dragoons' protection, while the dragoons enjoyed the attention that the emigrant girls lavished on them.

Other pleasures of the trail included the scenery, the buffalo hunts and the welcome break from the daily routine of garrison life. The dragoons experienced the adventures of two trails in 1845. They returned via the Santa Fe Trail in order to escort the freight wagons heading east that year, completing a march of 2200 miles in just 99 days!

The dragoons accomplished many things on their expedition. They gained valuable experience which would be useful during the Mexican War. They acquired knowledge of unexplored territory and established friendly relations with many Indian tribes. They also made the trails safer for overland travel, which encouraged westward expansion and contributed to the fulfillment of "Manifest Destiny."

Suggested Reading

Broadcloth and Britches: The Santa Fe Trade, Seymour V. Connor and Jimmy M. Skaggs
Scenes and Adventures in the Army, Capt. Phillip St. George Cooke
The West of Phillip St. George Cooke, Otis E. Young
Prairie Logbooks, Lt. James Henry Carleton
Fort Scott: Courage and Conflict on the Border, Leo Oliva



Map of 1845 Dragoon Expedition