

From California to Council Bluffs

By [Larry C. Porter](#)

Matthew Caldwell's journals give us new information about the return of fifteen Mormon Battalion soldiers to Council Bluffs.

Colonel Levi Williams of the largely anti-Mormon Warsaw, Illinois, militia stood on a plank placed across the box of a wagon and ordered his company commanders to form their units facing the wagon. Addressing his troops, he said, "Boys, the governor is not going to do anything for us. All that are in favor of going to Carthage in the morning step out three paces in front. Those contrary stand fast."¹ All but six men stepped forward. The colonel placed the six under guard while the rest prepared to march to Carthage to assault Joseph and Hyrum Smith held in the jail there.

Matthew Caldwell was one of the six. Having married an LDS woman, Barzilla Guymon, in 1843, he chose to stand fast, demonstrating his opposition to the attack. Matthew had seen [Joseph Smith](#) on several occasions and had noted the respect his followers had for him. He had no desire to participate in any action that could harm the man.

Early the next morning, the captain of the guard took Matthew to a nearby hill overlooking the Mississippi River. A cannon had been positioned there to fire on any boat coming downriver from Nauvoo should it fail to stop when hailed. The captain pointed to the cannon and said, "Caldwell, there's a horse for you to ride today."

Matthew replied, "I'm not used to tiding a horse like that."

"We will make you used to it," the guard retorted.

"They then proceeded to punch me with their bayonets until I was forced to get on the cannon," Matthew recalled. From this uncomfortable position, he saw two of his brothers ready to march with the Warsaw Dragoons to Carthage. Heedless of personal danger, Matthew got off the cannon and walked up to them. "I took them each by the shoulder and turned them around as if they were small boys and told them that they had promised me they would not go and for them to go back home, which they did."

Colonel Williams came up to Matthew and angrily drew his sword, threatening to "split him from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet." Matthew had to climb back on the cannon. He observed, "All through the 27th of June, a very hot day, I was forced to remain astride that cannon bareheaded." When the Smiths were assassinated, members of the mob-militia scattered, and Matthew was able to climb down and go home.

Less than two years later, in the spring of 1846, Matthew Caldwell and his wife joined the Saints' exile from Nauvoo into Iowa Territory. Having committed himself to the cause of the Saints, and with Brigham Young's encouragement, Matthew was baptized by Ezra T. Benson in

the Grand River at Mt. Pisgah, Iowa, on 17 June 1846. One month later, he was recruited as a member of Company E of the Mormon Battalion for duty in the Mexican War.

When the battalion arrived in San Diego on 29 January 1847, Private Caldwell and his fellow Church members found themselves in the middle of one of the most highly charged political episodes of that volatile era. On January 10, Brigadier General Stephen W. Kearney and Commodore Robert F. Stockton, on orders from Washington, D.C., to take control of California, had seized Los Angeles, a bastion of rebel resistance. The Californians, led by Andres Pico, fled northward, then surrendered to another United States force commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John C. Fremont, who had been appointed temporary governor of California by Commodore Stockton. Under Pico's signature, they entered into what has been called the "Cahuenga Capitulation," or the treaty of 13 January 1847,² which essentially ended the war.

When Kearney arrived claiming to be the new governor, John Fremont refused to accept Kearney's claim. Direct orders from Washington clarified the confusion in Kearney's favor, but Fremont continued to subvert the work of his superior. Finally, General Kearney decided that he had no alternative but to initiate court-martial proceedings against Fremont.

This would necessitate a trip east to bring Fremont to trial. Accordingly, General Kearney wrote the United States adjutant general, "I shall be compelled on arriving in Missouri to arrest him and send him under charges to report to you."³

The general, under whose command the Mormon Battalion had received their marching orders, found loyal support from the battalion. In recognition of their firm stance in his behalf, he ordered that fifteen men from the battalion be detailed to escort him and his detachment as far as Fort Leavenworth (in present-day Kansas). In addition to Matthew Caldwell, those selected were Sylvester Hulet, Nathaniel V. Jones, John W. Binley, Samuel G. Clark, Amos Cox, Gilman Gordon, Thomas C. Ivie, Ebenezer Landers, William F. Reynolds, William M. Spencer, Joseph Taylor, Elanson Tuttle, Charles Y. Webb, and Jeremiah Willey. Hulet was a lieutenant, Jones was a sergeant, and the rest were privates.⁴

Kearney designated Monterey, California, as the gathering point for all the assorted contingents that would make the eastward journey. He then gave the Mormon Battalion escort a choice of traveling from Los Angeles to Monterey by land or by sea. The majority chose to go by land under the command of Lieutenant William Tecumseh Sherman (later the famed Union general in the Civil War). Following the route of El Camino Real, Sherman's overland unit reached Monterey by pack mule on 25 May 1847.⁵

Jeremiah Willey and two other members of the battalion elected to go by sea with General Kearney and Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, a former commander of the Mormon Battalion.⁶ They boarded the storeship USS Lexington in San Pedro Bay and set sail on May 15 to a "fresh breeze from the S. & W. and pleasant."⁷ They dropped anchor in Monterey Bay on May 27.

The makeup of the company that left Monterey on 31 May 1847 was both impressive and interesting. With Brigadier General Stephen W. Kearney were Lieutenant Colonel Cooke;

member-elect to Congress Willard P. Hall, a former interpreter and guide for the Mormon Battalion; George B. Sanderson, formerly a surgeon to the Mormon Battalion; the fifteen-man battalion escort; Lieutenant Colonel John C. Fremont; two future witnesses in the court-martial, Major Thomas Swords and Captain Henry S. Turner; Lieutenant William Radford of the U. S. Navy; nineteen members of Fremont's old topographical party; and some servants, citizens, guides, and discharged dragoons. The unit totaled an estimated sixty-four men.⁸

Riding horses and mules, General Kearney's detachment progressed northward from Monterey to Sutter's Fort, then to Truckee Lake (later renamed Donner Lake), near the northern California and Nevada border. There they encountered the site where the George and Jacob Donner company had been trapped by the winter snows a few months before. Although survivors had already spread news of the disasters, no one had been able to reach the site to bury the bodies until the detachments arrived—probably in June 1847. Matthew Caldwell expressed his horror at the gruesome spectacle:

“As we were the first ones there, after the horrible death of these people, we made shovels, and after clearing out an old cellar, we put the bones of 150 persons [the Donner company actually comprised eighty-one people, thirty-six of whom perished from starvation and exposure to cold] into it and covered them as best we could.

“This was the most awful sight that my eyes were ever to behold. There was not a whole person that we could find.”⁹

From the Truckee, the detachment rode to Fort Hall (near present-day Pocatello, Idaho), then to Fort Bridger (in present-day Wyoming). Between Fort Bridger and Fort Laramie, the Latter-day Saints joyfully encountered an LDS pioneer company led by Elder Parley P. Pratt and John Smith, Joseph Smith's uncle. The pioneers were on their way to the Salt Lake Valley.

While helping to bury the dead of the Donner party, the bugler, J. C. Truigley (variously spelled), accidentally shot himself just below the collarbone. His condition steadily worsened, and twenty miles east of Fort Laramie, on the North Platte River, he requested that the general leave him behind with a small squad who could walk, bringing him along at a slower pace. Kearney detailed three of his LDS escorts, Matthew Caldwell, Charles Y. Webb, and William Spencer, to follow behind the detachment and assist the ailing bugler.

Unfortunately, while traveling at night, these men became lost and wandered for several days. They suffered extensively from want of food. They were saved only by an accidental meeting with a detail of five soldiers from Fort Laramie who were on a bee hunt for honey.¹⁰ Matthew Caldwell described their appearance when they finally reached Fort Leavenworth:

“Webb and Spencer had the raggedest pants that I had ever seen, and my antelope breeches had been wet and dry so much that they drew up to my knees. Our shirts were gone except the collars and a few strips down the back. I was entirely barefoot.”¹¹

Reporting to the paymaster at the fort on or about 25 September 1847, they received an issue of clothing, seventy-five dollars, and their discharge from the service (the other battalion members

had already been discharged). These veterans crossed to the east bank of the Missouri River by ferry and then walked to the Saints' camp at Kaneshville (Council Bluffs), Iowa.

Matthew wrote of the more-than-4,000-mile round-trip in simple yet telling terms: "This [last] two hundred miles on foot after being used to riding all summer was very hard on us. But as usual, we took it as we had done through the whole of the Battalion journey—as best we could."¹²

[photo] Matthew Caldwell risked his life to oppose his militia unit's attack on [Joseph Smith](#). Two years later, he joined the Church and signed up for the Mormon Battalion.

[illustration] Mormon Battalion, by George M. Ottinger

[illustration] As part of General Kearney's escort, four soldiers of the Mormon Battalion sailed to Monterey, California, on the USS Lexington. (USS Lexington, courtesy of the National Archives.)

[photo] Sculpture: Mormon Battalion Monument, by Ed Fraughton

[illustration] The last two hundred miles on foot were "very hard on us," wrote Matthew Caldwell. (Illustration by Brad Teare.)

[photo] After discovering an ambushed guard of soldiers, one group of Mormon Battalion soldiers fired their cannon every night to ward off Indians.

Researching the Mormon Battalion

Susan Easton Black, V. Ben Bloxham, Clark V. Johnson, and Larry C. Porter are examining the personal accounts of the approximately 559 men (officers, soldiers, guides, servants, and civilians), 35 women, and 42 children who participated in the Mormon Battalion's march. Through this approach, they are uncovering much new information.

During the Mexican War and the postwar era, the men and women of the battalion had a traceable impact on the territories and states through which they marched and in which they eventually made their homes. They were, for instance, instrumental in establishing a number of communities. Matthew Caldwell reportedly built the first cabin in what is now American Fork, Utah; served as the first mayor of Spanish Fork, Utah; was a justice of the peace; worked as a schoolteacher; and served as a delegate to the Utah territorial legislature.¹

A Canadian convert, Phebe Draper Palmer Brown, was one of four women who marched the entire distance from Council Bluffs to San Diego with the battalion, accompanying her husband, Sergeant Ebenezer Brown. She served as a laundress in Company A. They and their young son, Zemira, made the trip from California to Utah and assisted in the establishment of Draperville (now Draper), Utah. Ebenezer Brown served as a counselor to his brother-in-law William Draper, the first presiding elder in Draperville.²

Lydia Hunter, wife of Jesse D. Hunter, captain of Company B, also marched the entire journey. On 20 April 1847, she gave birth to Diego Hunter, who is referred to as the first American child born in San Diego. Lydia contracted “typhoid fever or a malignant form of Quetidian fever,” according to Dr. John S. Giffin, and died on 26 April 1847. She was buried on Point Loma, at the back of the Quarantine Station.³

Captain Hunter stayed in California after his discharge on 16 July 1847. He was appointed U. S. Indian agent for southern California and moved to San Luis Rey. He later raised cattle at San Bernardino and after that moved to Los Angeles, where he became a brick manufacturer and businessman. When he retired, he purchased about 2,500 acres north of Los Angeles for a ranch. Jesse died in Los Angeles on 27 August 1877, a highly respected citizen.⁴

The non-LDS participants in the battalion also made their marks. Among the officers, Brevet Second Lieutenant George Stoneman became a general in the Civil War and later governor of California from 1883 to 1887. Both Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke and First Lieutenant Andrew Jackson Smith rose to the rank of brevet major general in the Civil War.

At least nine guides served the battalion. One of them, Willard P. Hall, was named congressman-elect from Missouri while on duty in the Mexican War and served his term in Washington, D.C., from 3 March 1847 to 3 March 1853. He later served in 1864–65 as governor of Missouri. Another guide, Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, was born in 1805 during the Lewis and Clark expedition to the French-Canadian Toussaint Charbonneau and his wife, Sacajawea (Bird Woman), the famed Shoshone. Jean was later appointed alcalde (chief administrative and judicial officer of a Spanish town) within the district of San Diego.⁵

The fatalities in the Mormon Battalion may have been higher than previously supposed. Aside from civilian deaths, like those of John and Jane Bosco, an elderly couple, twenty-three battalion men died on active duty. Twenty-one of these had been inducted during the first enlistment period (16 July 1846 to 16 July 1847), and two had been among the eighty-two who had reenlisted between 20 July 1846 and 14 March 1848. Still others lost their lives on their return to the Salt Lake Valley or the Missouri River. Melissa Burton Coray, another of the four women who accompanied the battalion on the entire march, saw the death site of battalion members Daniel Browett, Daniel Allen, and Henderson Cox. These three, with the advance guard of a larger group of other veterans, had been attacked and killed by Indians. The spot in the Sierra Nevada Mountains was named Tragedy Springs. She wrote:

“They had been killed by Indians and their bodies had been thrown in a gulch, and partially covered with underbrush. I do not know why they took the trouble to half bury the bodies. Perhaps they thought they would catch us off our guard and kill us too. ... We had bought a small cannon at San Diego, and were bringing it with us. We were afraid of an attack at night, and so the cannon was fired off every little while to scare off the Indians.”⁶

The posterity of the battalion marchers have made their [family](#) records available for researchers. The leaders and members of the present-day U. S. Mormon Battalion, Inc., headquartered in Salt Lake City, have perpetuated the traditions of the battalion. Colonel R. Paul Madsen, director, and Lieutenant Colonel Elmer J. Carr, battalion historian, have greatly facilitated the research.

Notes

1. 1.

See Woodward and Koch.

2. 2.

See Sara P. Collinwood, comp., *The Descendants of George Palmer & Phebe Draper* (Provo, Utah: J. Grant Stevenson, 1962), p. 23.

3. 3.

See “Jesse D. Hunter [Family](#)” file, Mormon Battalion Visitors’ Center, San Diego, California.

4. 4.

Ibid.

5. 5.

See “Appointment of John Carbonneau and Alcalde,” letter of Colonel R. D. Mason to Colonel J. D. Stevenson, 24 November 1847, Tenth Military Department Records, National Archives.

6. 6.

Kate B. Carter, *Heart Throbs of the West* (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1948), p. 463.