

## The Time the US Army Almost Went To War With Utah's Mormons in 1854

In the 1850s railroads were all the rage, and the U.S. Army was sent to survey potential routes west of the Mississippi River. In the fall of 1853 Captain John Williams Gunnison of the Corps of Topographical Engineers and members of his railroad survey party were murdered in central Utah Territory. President Franklin Pierce dispatched a column of soldiers to investigate and to gain hegemony over Mormons of the region. Considered by many a religious cult, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had been driven out of Missouri and persecuted and attacked in Illinois through the 1830s and '40s. So, in the summer of 1847 Mormon emigrants led by Brigham Young had launched a westward exodus to found the State of Deseret, centered on Salt Lake City. In 1850 Congress organized the Mormon "Zion" as Utah Territory.

Captain Gunnison had long maintained friendly relations with the Mormons and in 1852 had published *The Mormons, or, Latter-day Saints, in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake*, a generally favorable account of their history. A year later the Army ordered the captain to conduct a topographical survey of the broader Great Basin region to determine its suitability as a route for a proposed transcontinental railroad. On June 2, 1853, the survey party—comprising Gunnison and co-commander Lieutenant Edward Beckwith, topographer and artist Richard Kern and assistant topographer James Snyder, astronomer Sheppard Homans, surgeon and geologist Dr. James Schiel and botanist Frederick Creutzfeldt—set out from Fort Leavenworth (in what would soon be organized as Kansas Territory) for Utah Territory. Accompanying them were Brevet Captain Robert Morris, 2nd Lt. Laurence Baker and some 30 Mounted Riflemen, while wagon master Charles Taplin headed the teamsters. In October Gunnison and his scientific team were exploring terrain near the territorial capital of Fillmore (Salt Lake City replaced it as the capital in 1856). Though warned of troubles with tribes in the area, the captain wasn't worried, as he had established good relations with the local Ute band. But on the morning of October 26 Ute warriors attacked the party's camp along the Sevier River near Black Canyon, killing Gunnison and seven others in what became known as the Gunnison Massacre.

Many Easterners were quick to pin the killings on the



**John Mix Stanley rendered this tinted lithograph of the Black Canyon after a sketch by Frederick W. von Egloffstein, who replaced the murdered artist Richard Kern. (San Francisco Public Library)**

Mormons, suggesting they had either disguised themselves as Indians or incited the Utes to commit the outrage. Many federal officials also suspected the Mormons had whipped up the tribesmen, perhaps out of fear a railroad through the territory would bring in "Gentiles" bent on further persecution. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis ultimately concurred, concluding the Mormons had conspired with Pahvant Utes to murder Gunnison and his men. President Pierce, under the pretext of forging a new military road to California and Oregon, furnished Brevet Lt. Col. Edward Steptoe of the 3rd U.S. Artillery with troops, horses and mules and tasked him with investigating the murders and bringing the guilty to justice. Lieutenant LaRhett Livingston, one of Colonel Steptoe's young officers, shared his understanding of the mission in a letter home to his father:

"The principal object in our wintering here is to avenge the death of Captain Gunnison... We are to keep dark [covert] until a fit opportunity for making prisoners or getting the real perpetrators of the deed. We are in fact sailing under sealed orders so as to further our purposes... whether the Indians had done it, for the sake of plunder and to gratify their bloodthirsty natures, or whether the Mormons had done it, or instigated the Indians to do it, for purposes of their own."

On June 1, 1854, Steptoe's 175-man force, comprising two companies of the 3rd Artillery and a gaggle of 1st Dragoon recruits, plus 150 civilians and more than

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700 horses and mules, marched west from Fort Leavenworth bound for Salt Lake City. While some contemporary chroniclers suspected Davis had directed Steptoe to place all of Utah Territory under martial law, historians assert the secretary of war had instructed the colonel merely to assess the state of affairs in the territory and to help civil authorities identify and apprehend those responsible for the Gunnison Massacre.

### TOWARD SALT LAKE

Many of Steptoe's troops groused about the mismatched surplus Mexican War uniforms they'd drawn from the quartermaster. Lieutenant Ben Allston, who proudly rode his steed at the head of his newly mounted unit and gloried in his newfound status, poked fun at his own expense in a letter home to his mother:

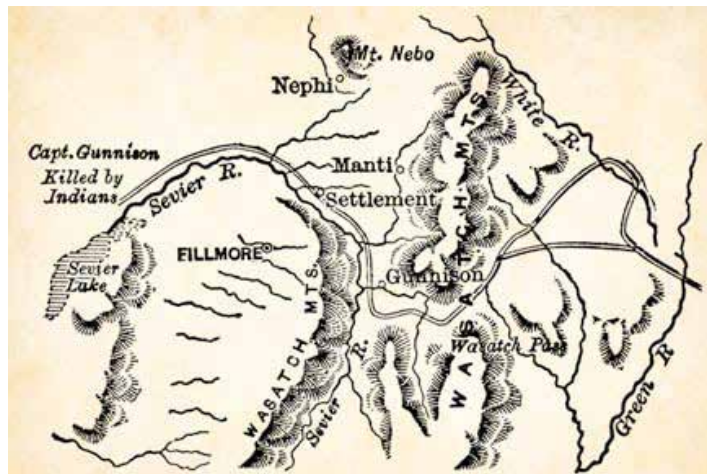
"You would laugh to see my costume—one of your check shirts, rather more dirty-stained [than] you would like to see it, no collar and no cravat and a common gray flannel shirt used as a coat. This, with my pants rolled up to my knees almost, completes my costume."

Captain Rufus Ingalls, Steptoe's assistant quartermaster, painted a grand tableau of the caravan that set forth from Fort Leavenworth. It tallied 300 horses, 448 mules, 70 heavy baggage wagons and seven light wagons, to which the quartermaster had attached the horses in strings of from 30 to 40.

By late August the column had descended the western slope of the Rockies, rested and caught from a distance their first glimpse of fabled Salt Lake City. The opinion these soldiers had of the Mormons differed markedly from that expressed by dragoons on prior, reciprocally friendly encounters with Mormons. While stationed in Los Angeles during the 1846–48 Mexican War, for example, local Mormons and dragoons had regarded one another with mutual respect. Sergeant Dan Tyler of the Mormon Battalion recalled the situation there in 1847:

"When bullies came into the town and began to impose upon the 'Mormon boys,' the dragoons would not allow them to take their own part if they could avoid it, but would say, 'Stand back; you are religious men, and we are not; we will take all of your fights into our hands,' and with an oath would say, 'You shall not be imposed upon by them.' Several instances of the kind might be named."

In the immediate postwar period, however, soldiers



**Utes killed Gunnison, Kern and six other members of the survey party near this gorge on the Sevier River.** (University of California Libraries)

increasingly shared the opinion that Mormons were an undesirable element not conforming to prevailing Protestant norms. Polygamy was the leading object of their ire. "It is with difficulty that our officers can keep the soldiers from cleaning out the Mormon men," wrote an enlisted man stationed at Fort Webster in New Mexico Territory. "They are given scant welcome or courtesy here and are hurried off as soon as possible." In June 1852 the same soldier's troop encountered a wagon train of California-bound Mormons. "[The men] are perfectly willing for the soldiers to protect their trains from the Indians but don't want us to look at the women with them," he wrote. "The Mormon men acting ugly and our officers, fearing trouble between the soldiers and them, did not permit us to remain long enough at the springs to rest before we are hurried off."

News of the Gunnison Massacre further hardened both military and public opinion against the denizens of Utah Territory. "I cannot express to you what a thorough disgust I have for the whole religion," wrote Lieutenant Allston, "and it only, in my opinion, needs one to be an eyewitness to be of the same tone of feeling." Such loathing reflected the general opinion among the rank and file.

The unexpected appearance of a sprawling Army column at the gates of Salt Lake City on August 3, 1854, shocked the Mormon leaders. Prophet cum Territorial Governor Brigham Young and church elders rode out to meet the troops and protest their presence. "It was

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no use, however," Private James Stevenson boasted in a letter home, "for in we went and were quartered in the very heart of the city." German-born Private William Antes journaled of the column's arrival and left a detailed description of the town and its residents. "Just imagine a continuous walk of three months, covering 1,200 miles, and think of our delight when...we reached Great Salt Lake City, Utah Territory," he wrote. "We marched into the suburbs when our colonel soon made his appearance, accompanied by Brigham Young himself, as we soon discovered. All eyes were at once directed toward the great apostle of polygamy. He was dressed in black pants, white shirt, fine boots and a high silk hat. He wore no coat. At the time of which we write, Brigham Young was aged 53 years, and he gloried in the possession of 57 wives!"

Antes went on to describe the settlement and its residents:

"The city is well laid out with wide streets; the water, which comes from the mountain, runs on both sides of the streets. The houses are built of adobe, some one story, others two or three stories high; each house has a garden in the rear. The city is enclosed by a mud wall, with portholes here or there in case of Indian attacks. Three iron cannons are housed on a hill north of the city.

"Salt Lake had then 12,000 inhabitants, mostly Mormons, consisting of Americans, English, Swedes, Germans, French Canadians and Denmarkians [sic]. There was at that time one theater, one hotel, about four goods stores [and] one bath built over a cold and hot spring... only a few feet apart. There was also a public square, called the Union Square, and the only church in the city was a Mormon house of worship and was only built as a temporary edifice. The foundation for the largest church in the world was partly laid at the time I saw it."

### "THE MEN ARE VERY TROUBLESOME"

For a time Colonel Steptoe encamped in Union Square, the better to keep an eye on the locals. Relations between the soldiers and the Mormons were tense from the start. Days after the soldiers set up camp, some 500 new converts arrived in Salt Lake City and pressed for space in the square, their proximity posing a threat in the minds of soldiers.

In October the colonel initiated the expedition's pri-



**Brevet Lt. Col. Edward Steptoe was tasked with bringing the Gunnison Massacre killers to justice.**  
*(Allen County Public Library)*

mary mission, sending a detachment under Brevet Maj. John F. Reynolds and Lieutenant Allston to track down the perpetrators of the Gunnison Massacre. Among the detachment's enlisted men were Privates Stevenson and Antes, the latter of whom nearly killed a fellow rider. "I narrowly escaped shooting a soldier by the accidental discharge of my gun," Antes recalled. "In riding along, I suppose the hammer of my gun became entangled in the picket ropes, and hence the discharge. The soldier looked very pale for awhile from the fright I had unintentionally given him." The percussion firearms carried by mounted soldiers in the antebellum era were notoriously dangerous, not only to the enemy but also to the shooter. Most bore conspicuous hammers on the right side of the gun, making them susceptible to snagging and accidental discharge, as Antes learned to his chagrin.

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Through the winter months the column's supplies of food, provender and clothing intermittently ran low, requiring the Army to purchase supplies from Mormon merchants, usually at inflated prices. Yet Antes went out of his way to mention the compassion with which Mormon citizens treated two impoverished, dishonorably discharged soldiers. Indeed, the private held a far less hostile view of Mormons than that held by many of his comrades, possibly because he was a Roman Catholic—a despised religious minority in the mid-19th century United States—or perhaps he was simply more open-minded. His curiosity about the Mormon faith prompted him and three fellow German-born soldiers to attend a prayer meeting conducted in German in the partially built temple, though Antes confessed the bombastic tone of the sermon did not suit him.

The Gunnison Massacre site, southwest of Hinckley in west-central Utah's Millard County, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. (360Cities.net/Alamy Stock Photo)

A common fear among the Mormons was that lustful soldiers would molest their women. Eavesdropping on prayer meetings, Stevenson heard leading elders "scold and threaten the women for their reported intimacy with the 'Gentiles,' and especially with the soldiers, and the language used was not very choice." Lieutenant Livingston also heard Mormon elders advise women to "avoid the society of 'Gentiles,' as they term us." In a September 17 letter to a friend Lieutenant Sylvester Mowry noted with amusement that Elder Heber C. Kimball had preached a sermon in which he warned soldiers to keep their "hands off" their women and warned the women to keep themselves pure. Such remonstrances by church elders were hardly unwarranted. "Brigham's daughter-in-law is the prettiest woman I have seen yet," a rakish Mowry wrote. "Her husband is on a mission, and she is as hot a thing as you could wish. I am going to make the attempt, and if I succeed and don't get my head blown off by being caught shall esteem myself some." Soon enough the lieutenant was caught up in an affair with the woman. He was not alone in his hot-blooded desires.

Alcohol was another common temptation for officers and soldiers out West. As of 1854 the Mormon religion had not wholly forbidden its use or sale. In fact, local merchants soon discovered to their delight the profit-

ability of selling spirits to their winter guests. Livingston wrote his father of the trade in alcohol and its deleterious effects on the ranks. "The men are very troublesome in the city, and I don't know as we will ever get them straight," he wrote. "I have been on a court this morning to try six cases of drunkenness, and it is a thing that is recurring all the time. The Mormons will sell the soldiers liquor, and if I was in command, I would spill every drop on the ground."

### AN UNSATISFYING VERDICT

Tensions between the Mormons and soldiers reached a boiling point in late December when a drunken trooper picked a fight with civilians in a crowded theater. Army officers immediately intervened. But on Christmas Day a donnybrook involving some 300 soldiers and Mormons broke out on the Salt Lake City streets. As Livingston recalled, after an exchange of jeers, "stones and clubs did better execution." Shots were fired, but no one was hit. Steptoe's officers and Mormon police quickly put a stop to the violence. Livingston pinned blame on a "desperate set of rascals infesting this city" and noted the soldiers "will not be run over if they can help it." In the wake of the riot the colonel ordered enlisted men confined to quarters for the remainder of the holiday season.

Officers, of course, were not confined to quarters and celebrated New Year's Eve at a ball thrown by Young in their honor. But the damage was done. The depravity of a few soldiers had stiffened Mormon resistance to federal authority, exacerbated further in 1857 when President James Buchanan authorized a large force to invade the territory at the outset of the Utah War.

The Pahvant tribe ultimately surrendered seven men to the Mormons, and in early February 1855 soldiers escorted the Ute suspects, one of whom had brought along his wife, to Nephi City to stand trial for the murders of Gunnison and party. On the eve of the proceedings a grand jury dropped the charges against four of the men, indicting the other three. Their trial began on March 21 and lasted three days. Defense Attorney Almon Babbitt initially moved for dismissal, arguing that his clients could not be guilty of murder, as their tribe had been at war with the United States. The judge denied his motion. "There were many witnesses who went to prove the fact of their having been engaged in the affair," All-

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ston recalled, “but the evidence of the squaw was damning. She said that all were there and participated in the massacre, and that one of them...saw the party coming down to the river and told his followers, saying, ‘There come the Americans—come let us kill them.’”

Though their duty seemed clear, the members of the all-Mormon jury, in counsel with church elders, feared that a guilty verdict followed by a triple execution would lead to war with the tribe. Thus, they found the defendants guilty only of manslaughter, a non-capital offense. Sentenced to the maximum penalty of three years, the Utes were sent to the territorial penitentiary. Then came a further affront to justice. “Within less than a week they were permitted to escape and are again at large,” reported *The New York Times*. “The Mormons connived at it in order to ingratiate themselves with the Indians,” a disgusted Stevenson opined of the escape, echoing the sentiments of his comrades.

At news of the unsatisfactory verdict, the soldiers' hostility toward the Mormons finally boiled over. Anxious to avoid stirring the Mormons' mutual animosity, Steptoe had already turned down President Pierce's proffered appointment to serve as territorial governor in Young's stead. On April 29, to further defuse tensions and prevent a reprise of the Christmas day riot, the colonel quietly marched his soldiers out of Salt Lake City. They encamped at a spot along the Weber River some 35 miles north of town, where the men cooled off while the column's stock watered, grazed and gathered strength for the onward route-finding march west.

A handful of women and girls seeking either to escape plural marriage or Mormon religious strictures, or both, accompanied the departing column. Though doubtless glad to see off the Army, Mormon leaders were anything but pleased to see soldiers carry off their womenfolk. A few boorish officers left a particularly bad impression, as Stevenson noted:

“One of our officers carried a Mormon girl along with him to California. Another officer attempted to play Mormon by carrying off two sisters, but Colonel Steptoe caused him to take them back to their friends. When the officer attempted to do so, he was fired upon by the brother of the young ladies and came near being killed. Served him right!”

For the march west Steptoe split his command. One detachment was to circle north around the Great Salt

Lake, follow the Humboldt River, then swing northwest to the Sacramento Valley. The other was to bear southwesterly across the Mohave Desert to Fort Tejon, north of Los Angeles. Among the latter detachment were 32 men of the 1st Dragoons, including Privates Antes and Stevenson, who would record many more adventures beyond Zion.

Will Gorenfeld is the co-author, with son John Gorenfeld, of *Kearny's Dragoons Out West*. For further reading he recommends *At Sword's Point, Part 1: A Documentary History of the Utah War to 1858* (Vol. 10 of *Kingdom in the West: The Mormons and the American Frontier*), by William P. MacKinnon; “Sex, Subalterns and Steptoe: Army Behavior, Mormon Rage and Utah War Anxieties,” also by MacKinnon, in Vol. 76, No. 3, of the *Utah Historical Quarterly* (2008); and “Lieutenant Sylvester Mowry's Report on His March in 1855 From Salt Lake City to Fort Tejon,” by Lynn R. Bailey, in Vol. 7, No. 4, of *Arizona and the West: A Quarterly Journal of History* (1965).



**Gunnison Massacre Site**

The site of the massacre was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. A stone monument marks the spot where the massacre occurred. To get to it, travel west from Delta on Highway 50, and several miles past Hinckley to a road sign that marks the turn off. Go south about 1/2 mile to the marker. Because of vandalism, the plaque describing the event was moved to the Great Basin Museum in Delta.