

### THE FIRST FORT KEARNEY.

When writers on early western history speak of old Fort Kearney, it is usually quite safe to assume that the post they have in mind is the one so long maintained at the head of Grand Island, on the south side of the Platte, which was a landmark to so many thousand travelers over the plains in the freighting days; but there was a time when this was New Fort Kearney, and the Old Fort Kearney of those days was at Nebraska City. There are people who have heard something to this effect, who are still not quite clear as to the facts in the case. THE CONSERVATIVE, in its issue of February 2, 1899, gave all the documents on file in the War department office at Washington bearing on this establishment, and these are, and must always be, the bulk of the authoritative history of it.

The following is meant as a synopsis of these documents, giving the facts obtained from them arranged consecutively. The confessions of ignorance which the writer is compelled to make at too many points in the narrative, are meant, not so much as apologies, but rather to suggest to readers interesting lines for investigation; and possibly to incite some well-informed person to give him the information which he lacks.

#### The Act of 1836.

The germ of the military post at this point is found in an act of congress of July 2, 1836, providing for the opening of a military road between some point on the Upper Mississippi and another on Red river. There was at this time no government post on the Missouri river higher than Fort Leavenworth. One had been established, in June, 1821, at or near the sites of the Council Bluff of Lewis and Clark and the Engineer Cantonment of Major Long; this was called first Fort Atkinson, after General Henry Atkinson, who had encamped there in the summer of 1819, and afterwards Fort Calhoun, after Monroe's secretary of war, then in office; but the troops were removed, in June, 1827, to a point below, which was christened Cantonment Leavenworth in honor of their late commander, Col. Henry Leavenworth.

#### The Road.

As to this military road; the Red river, which was its destination, will have been, out of the dozen or more Red rivers which confuse the reader of early travels, the one which empties into the Mississippi at a point a short distance above Baton Rouge; it was, by an agreement made in 1819, considered the southern boundary of the Louisiana purchase, between the 94th and 100th meridians, and was therefore the Spanish frontier and a source of anxiety from the beginning until the Mexican war put an end to that class of questions.

Its true course was not fully known in 1836; Major Long had demonstrated (unwillingly) in 1820 that it did not, as had been supposed, rise in the neighborhood of Santa Fe, but its actual source was a mystery until the year 1852. The objective point of the proposed military road is therefore easily explained; but I do not understand the other end of it. This was to be "some point upon the right bank of the Mississippi, between the mouth of the St. Peter's (Minnesota) and the mouth of the Des Moines river." This would not have connected with any settlement or line of travel that I am acquainted with. There was no travel across Iowa for upwards of twenty years after this time. The old French traders' route through Wisconsin to Prairie du Chien had long been disused. People reached points on the Missouri by going down the Ohio river to St. Louis by steamboat. The further stipulation of the act "that the said road shall pass west of the state of Missouri and of the territory of Arkansas" is another puzzle, as it would require the road to form something like a right angle.

#### The Commission.

I have no reason to think that any portion of this highway was ever built, but \$100,000 was appropriated for the purpose, and one may believe that it was all expended in some way. S. W. Kearney and Nathan Boone, colonel and captain respectively, at that time, of the First Dragoons, were appointed "commissioners;" I do not know their duties as such, only that they included "examining the country near the Missouri river for the purpose of selecting a site for the advance military post." Their explorations to this end brought them to Nebraska City, and on their reaching Fort Leavenworth, in April, 1838, they made a report, under date of the 25th, recommending for the new post "an eminence near the mouth of Table Creek."

It is probable that the two Table Creeks had at this time but one mouth. That was the condition in 1854, the south creek running northward close under the bench, where the distillery buildings afterwards stood, to join the other. Its present mouth was contrived some years later by William E. Hill, to drain the marshy tract that resulted, and improve the health of the community. The "eminence" was the same that we climb in coming up Main street.

#### The Location.

The commissioners say that they have examined all the country above, and that there is no other point this side the Platte that will answer; Fonfon's trading post at Bellevue has some good points, but they intimate that 120 miles from Fort Leavenworth is quite far enough to venture men among the

"mass" of warlike and powerful Indians that inhabit the country. Nebraska City also suits them admirably. There is "a very gradual and beautiful ascent immediately above the mouth of the creek, which in about 450 yards reaches to an open level sufficient for any buildings, besides what may be necessary for the drill of any number of infantry or dragoons." This open level was the ground from the Morton House to the Sixth street school, and the drill-ground was the lower plateau to the south-east, the present Missouri Pacific yards; long used for circuses.

Other advantages that struck them were convenient firewood; stone; building timber across the river; a "delightful" view; the best place for a ferry to be found on the Missouri river; fine prairies around, to make corn and hay upon; and a beautiful, fertile bottom for gardens. The only objection they see is that the place is five or six miles below where the Missouri state line strikes the river; a fact in regard to the early surveys that has not come to my notice elsewhere. The reason for this being considered an objection must be that their road was obliged to keep west of Missouri.

They "cannot omit this opportunity" to urge in the same report the immediate making of the military road from Fort Leavenworth south, to at least the top of the hill across the Kansas; the Wakarusa Butte, probably. This was a distinct project from the wild-goose road of the 1836 bill. It was a present need for the protection of the Santa Fe caravans, which, going out the south side of the Kansas from Independence, often had need of government troops from the fort as an escort. A few years before this, Major Biley, going out on such an errand, was obliged to cross the Missouri twice because he could not get across the Kansas.

#### The Times.

What was this county like in the year 1838? It was the great small-pox year among the Indians; the first sale of land on the site of Kansas City was made; the Pawnees celebrated their last human sacrifice; the Mormon troubles at Far West occurred; Fremont was doing his first surveying, with Nicollet, on the Upper Mississippi; the great Jim Beckwourth had left the Crows for the Cheyennes; George Catlin was among the Seminoles; Carson and Bridger were young men, hunting and trapping; Wyeth had just given up in Oregon, and the first missionaries were experimenting in that remote wilderness.

As to our commissioners, the senior was the later general, Stephen W. Kearney, of great prominence in the Mexican war and throughout the early history of the south-west; Captain Nathan Boone was a son of "old" Nathan, who was Daniel Boone's son. He was born in Ken-