

Maverick of the Frontier: Commander Henry Leavenworth

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The purpose of this study is to prove that Henry Leavenworth's highly interpersonal and innovative leadership style clearly distinguished him as one of the most accomplished commanders of the Early American West.

Research methods include the use of 26 sources

Henry Leavenworth, Arikara War, Arikara Indians, William Ashley, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Oklahoma, Fort Gibson, Dragoons, Henry Dodge, Pawnee, Comanche

Henry Leavenworth is an American hero. Over the course of his career, he was brevetted three times for gallantry in battle, and he served with distinction from the snowdrifts of Canada to the blistering plains of western Oklahoma. Henry was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1783 to Revolutionary War veteran, Colonel Jesse Leavenworth and his wife Catherine.¹ After finishing primary school in Delaware County, New York, Leavenworth worked at a law office. Dedicated to success, he studied law while working there, and he was quickly admitted to the New York Bar. As a practicing lawyer, he became immensely popular throughout his county, yet he was destined for a different carrier.² When the War of 1812 broke out, the 29 year old lawyer raised a company of volunteers from the area and was elected its captain.³ The company served under General Winfield Scott. Leavenworth's intelligence and sound judgment earned him the rank of major less than a year later. During Winfield Scott's famed victory at the battle of Chippewa, Leavenworth served with distinction, and earned the rank of lieutenant colonel.⁴ A short while later, his quick thinking and leadership at the battle of Lundy's Lane played a major part in the American victory. He was brevetted to colonel, the rank at which he finished the war.⁵ Thus, in less than three years, Henry Leavenworth rose from the rank of captain to colonel, a feat that typically takes twenty years in today's military.

Leavenworth's career was just beginning. His charisma was captured in one soldier's first impression of him, "He entered our encampment and sallied from tent to tent, heartily shaking

¹ William R. Nester, *The Arikara War: The First Plains Indian War, 1823* (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2001), 153.

² *Ibid.*

³ John W. Partin, *A Brief History of Fort Leavenworth 1827-1983* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983), 13.

⁴ Nester, 153.

⁵ *Ibid.*

hands with many of his old friends whom he met, and bestowing a smile upon all around him.”⁶

In this study, it will be proven that Henry Leavenworth’s highly interpersonal and innovative leadership style clearly distinguished him as one of the most accomplished commanders of the Early American West.



Figure 1. Lieutenant Colonel Henry Leavenworth, c. 1820; The Arikara War. Notice Leavenworth’s confident professionalism and adherence to uniform standards.

Source: William R. Nester, *The Arikara War: The First Plains Indian War, 1823*.

The first true test of Colonel Henry Leavenworth on the frontier was the Arikara War.⁷ During this conflict, the Colonel showed tremendous initiative in his response to challenges as well as a respect for Native American livelihood that was not typical on the frontier. His command decisions saved the lives of numerous American Soldiers and hundreds of Arikara civilians. Known as the first major conflict the United States had with a plains Native American

⁶ Anonymous, *Dragoon Campaigns to the Rocky Mountains* (New York: Wiley and Long, 1836), 105.

⁷ Charles K Gardner, *In A Dictionary of all Officers, Who have been Commissioned, Or have been Appointed and Served, in the Army of the United States* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1853), 272-273.

tribe, the Arikara War was short, bloody and controversial. The war was sparked when trappers of the Missouri Fur Company were attacked by Arikara, also called Rickaree or Ree, warriors when conducting a trading expedition along the Upper Missouri River in present day South Dakota.⁸ The Missouri Fur Company was founded by former Brigadier General William Henry Ashley, often called General Ashley. He led a brigade of young trappers known as “Ashley’s Hundred.”⁹ In the spring of 1823, Ashley set off up the Missouri with his 100 men with the goals of reaching the fur fortune that lay in the Rocky Mountains. Ashley hoped to establish a rendezvous system where trappers and Native Americans could bring out each year’s pelts to one massive trade gathering.¹⁰ When Ashley’s party reached South Dakota, he planned to trade with the Arikara Indians at their strategically placed village at a dominating point on the Missouri River. Ashley needed 40 to 50 horses to help assist with the last half of his journey.¹¹ The trading did not go as planned.

The party arrived peacefully on May 30th, 1823, but trade went poorly. The Rees Chief, Grey Eyes, understood the value of Rees horses and knew they controlled the only substantial amount in the immediate area.¹² Ashley secured only 19 horses, and those were at a steep price.¹³ The night of June 1st, Ashley and the men spotted Rees warriors watching them from the woods. Suspicious, General Ashley doubled the men on the shore guarding the horses to 40 while the rest of the party slept on the boats. That night, two of his men, Edward Rose and Aaron

⁸ Roger L. Nichols, "Backdrop for Disaster: Causes of the Arikara War of 1823," *South Dakota History* 14, no. 2 (1984): 93.

⁹ Robert Willoughby, "The Arikara War of 1823: The Impact on Ashley's Fur Trade Operations on the Northern Plains" *Heritage of the Great Plains* 44, no. 2 (2012): 7.

¹⁰ Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 214.

¹¹ Nichols, 94.

¹² Willoughby, 11.

¹³ Nester, 140.

Stephens, disobeyed orders and snuck off to the village with the intention of finding female company.¹⁴ Ashley recants what happened next in a letter printed in the *Missouri Republican* on June 24, 1823:

The next morning, about half past 3 o'clock, I was informed that Aaron Stephens, one of my men, had been killed by the Indians, and that in all probability they would be attacked in a few minutes... At sunrise the Indians commenced a heavy and well directed fire from a line... about six hundred yards in length. Their aim was principally at the men on the shore.¹⁵

The concealed Arikara warriors' concentrated fire ripped through the men left on the open shore. Those who could, retreated to the boats. Less than 15 minutes after the initial shot, Ashley ordered the remaining Ashley men to retreat downstream. Spurred by his men, Ashley made the decision to withdraw back to an island out of Rees territory, and call for reinforcements.¹⁶ When his men reached Fort Atkinson and reported the attack, the US Army was ready to retaliate.

Colonel Henry Leavenworth swiftly took action. On June 18th, Ashley's men reached Fort Atkinson, where Leavenworth commanded. Benjamin O'Fallon, the Indian agent at Fort Atkinson, responded to Ashley imminently with Leavenworth's decision:

Colonel Leavenworth and myself have consulted, and he has determined to lose no time in giving you relief, and punishing and putting if possible a final end to the repeated and most shocking outrages of the Arikaras. He is now preparing and setting out with the utmost dispatch an efficient force of upwards of 230 men.¹⁷

Leavenworth had made a historical command decision. Never had the United States Army moved out in such full force against an enemy on the Great Plains. Leavenworth understood that there had been repeated Native American attacks before, but if a plains tribe could attack such a large force of Americans unpunished, it could result in unrestricted raiding throughout the Upper

¹⁴ Willoughby, 11.

¹⁵ William Henry Ashley, "Letter from William Ashley to a Gentleman in Franklin, Missouri, June 7, 1823" *Missouri Republican*, 1823.

¹⁶ Nester, 147.

¹⁷ Benjamin O'Fallon to William Ashley, June 20, 1823, in Dale Morgan, editor, *The West of William H. Ashley* (Denver: The Old West Publishing Company, 1964), 35.

Missouri. He showed tremendous daring, confidence and ability by ordering the response without first consulting his superiors. However, it proved clear that he made the correct decision, and his superiors responded well. General Edmund Gaines, Leavenworth's superior, reported to Washington D.C. that he had "great confidence in the discretion and conduct of that officer, and [Gaines was] persuaded that the circumstances of the case justified the step which he has taken."¹⁸ Having made his decision, Leavenworth prepared the six companies of his regiment, loaded his artillery on boats manned by Ashley's men, and headed north on June 22, 1823, just four days after Ashley's messengers and wounded arrived at Fort Atkinson.¹⁹

Leavenworth's force, called the Missouri Legion, marched north with haste and arrived at the Lakota, or Sioux, village where Ashley had taken refuge on July 30th.²⁰ The legion, along with Ashley's men, surged up the river. On August 3rd, they came into contact with a Saone band of Hunkpapa. After exchanging gifts, the Sioux chiefs threw a huge feast. Leavenworth saw tremendous value in securing the Sioux as an ally because their light cavalry could match the Arikara's speed. That night Major Pilcher, Leavenworth's Indian agent, added them to the campaign as allies.²¹ On the 8th of August, Leavenworth halted his still undetected his forces 16 miles south of the Arikara villages. The next morning he set out with his full force of 750 Lakota warriors, 50 fur trappers, his regiment of infantry and his artillery. By noon the next day, the Legion reached the Grand River, which flowed six miles downstream of the Rees' villages. Fearful the Arikaras would flee their villages once his force was detected, Colonel Leavenworth sent forth his Lakota light cavalry, a company of infantry, and the trappers to engage the

¹⁸ Nester, 154.

¹⁹ Aaron Robert Woodard, "William Ashley and Jedediah Smith and the Arikara Battle of 1823," *Journal of the West* 51, no. 4 (2012): 80.

²⁰ Nester, 165.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

enemy.²² Unfortunately, the undisciplined light cavalry charged ahead of the infantry. James Clyman, a mountain man, describes the scene he saw when the infantry and mountain men caught up with the Sioux horsemen:

...the plain was covered with Indians which looked more like a swarm [of] bees than a battle field...the Rees having mounted and met the Sioux half a mile from their pickets...as soon as we came into sight the Rees retreated into their village.²³

Leavenworth recounts a similar story. “The Ricaras maintained their ground, or rather drove the Sioux back, until the regular troops, and General Ashley’s men arrive, and formed a line. The Ricaras were then imminently driven into their town.”²⁴ After the skirmish, Leavenworth had his full force ready to strike, with the exception of his cannon, which was struggling against head winds on the river in the keel boats. He made the decision to pause the attack until the next morning. He understood that the enemy was encircled and tired, and they would be hard pressed to escape with their women, children and possessions, but standard military doctrine of the day demanded that an infantry assault be preceded with an artillery barrage if possible. Most importantly, his men had just endured a 15 mile trek in the summer heat and were fatigued.²⁵ Leavenworth ensured that the enemy was properly surrounded and then ordered his men to rest up for a morning assault.

On the morning of August 10th, Leavenworth proceeded the storming of the Arikara village with a deadly artillery barrage.²⁶ The village was split into two sections: a lower village and an upper village. Leavenworth shelled both. The both sections of the village appeared

²² William Ashley, *The West of William H. Ashley*, Dale Morgan, editor, 53.

²³ James Clyman, “Journal of James Clyman,” August 8th 1823, in Dale Morgan, editor, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 53.

²⁴ Nester, 170.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ashley, 53.

relatively undamaged and many Indians hid in the safety of their cellars. However, the Arikara chief Grey Eyes, who had been the largest supporter of conflict with Americans, was killed by an early shot.²⁷ Leavenworth ordered Ashley to launch a diversionary attack to gain a strategic ravine just below the lower village while a rifle company assaulted the upper village. Both units moved successfully into position; hammers ready to strike the anvil.²⁸

It was at this critical moment that Colonel Leavenworth hesitated. Leavenworth did not realize that the barrage had broken the morale of the Arikara, almost all of whom had never experienced an artillery barrage. Also, only a portion of the Arikara supported the war, and with their leader Grey Eyes dead, they faltered in their courage. Leavenworth saw his attack as an all-out gamble with potential to either destroy his force or “annihilate an entire tribe too defiant to surrender.”²⁹ Unwilling to roll the dice, he ordered his men to withdraw to their original positions. Only two men under Leavenworth’s command had been wounded during the engagement; conversely the Arikara death toll was estimated at roughly 50 warriors.³⁰ A few hours later, a lone chief rode out of the village to parlay. Leavenworth rode out with Joshua Pilcher, his Indian Agent, to meet him.³¹

The Arikara Chief, Little Soldier, explained that Grey Eyes had instigated the original attack and pleaded with Leavenworth for peace. Leavenworth had Little Soldier go back to the village and return with the other chiefs. While Little Soldier was gone, Pilcher demanded that the peace talks be stopped. He argued, “nothing short of a drastic resolution of the present difficulty

²⁷ Nester, 172.

²⁸ Willoughby, 15.

²⁹ Nester, 174.

³⁰ Henry Leavenworth to the Secretary of War, “Official Report”, August 15, 1823, in Dale Morgan, editor, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 56.

³¹ Brad Tennant, “The Arikara: Roadblock to the American Fur Trade on the Northern Great Plains” *Heritage of the Great Plains* 44, no. 2 (2012): 29.

would convince the tribes of the Upper Missouri of the power of the United States.”³²

Leavenworth dismissed his advice. Together with General Ashley, they reached a treaty and smoked a peace pipe. The treaty bound the Arikaras to restore Ashley: any horses that they could, all of the guns, and all of the property they took, as well as to not obstruct the navigation of the Missouri, treat all American citizens with kindness and civility, and to punish anyone who commits acts of violence upon any American Citizen.³³ Leavenworth also gave them a warning which he recounts in a report to his commanding officer:

I addressed them...they had seen but a small specimen of the power of the Americans-That they were in our power, but we did not wish to hurt them if they behaved well...the wish (of the Americans was) to be at peace with all the red skins... (but) should they behave badly...expect to be more severely punished.³⁴

After the treaty was signed, the situation became muddy. The peace infuriated the Sioux and many of Ashley’s men who wanted to ransack Arikara. That night the Sioux withdrew back to their own territory.³⁵ The Arikara did not produce the quantity of goods promised to Ashley which, had the potential to lead to conflict. That evening, the Arikara, frightened by the threat of further American attacks, slipped by Leavenworth’s sentries and vanished. The next morning, Leavenworth sent riders after them, urging them to return and warning that without their presence, their village could be burned by “bad men and bad Indians.”³⁶ However, the Arikara did not return. On August 15th, without the Arikara present and no reason to stay, the Missouri Legion crammed on the Keel boats and rode the river back down south. Shortly after departing, they saw pillars of smoke from the village and stopped. They returned and found that it had been

³² Nester, 174.

³³ Henry Leavenworth to the Secretary of War, “Official Report”, August 15, 1823, in Dale Morgan, editor, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 54.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Nester, 174.

³⁶ Henry Leavenworth to the Secretary of War, “Official Report”, August 15, 1823, in Dale Morgan, editor, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 55.

razed by two of Pilcher's men. This infuriated Leavenworth, who blamed Pilcher. Yet without further proof, Leavenworth could do nothing to Pilcher. The Legion once again set off to Fort Atkinson, where Leavenworth would fight another battle, this time in the press, to save his reputation.

The way Leavenworth handled the Arikara set the newspapers ablaze with accusations of his inability as an officer and editorials by starch defenders of his actions. The Indian Agents, Pilcher and O'Fallon, participants in the fur industry, and some of Ashley's Hundred all favored a near annihilation of the Arikaras as a show of American military might to all Plains Tribes.³⁷ McDonald, Pilcher's friend who set the Arikara village ablaze, blasted Leavenworth's mercy in *The Washington Gazette*. "...my house and trading establishments were within sixty miles of the Arickara towns...the vengeance of the Arickaras, exasperated by the inefficient attack upon them...exposed [me] to the remorseless ferocity of the whole tribe."³⁸ Pilcher, in a letter reviewing Leavenworth's conduct commented, "your operations have...[left the Indians] the greatest possible contempt for the American character." Leavenworth was quick to defend himself. In his report of the engagement he both justifies his actions and places the blame for any future Arikara attacks onto McDonald:

I felt confident that the Indians had been sufficiently humbled "fully to convince them of our ability to punish any injury they might do us," and that they would behave in the future, if we left them undisturbed in their villages: Gen. Ashley's boats then, I had no doubt, proceed without molestation, to the mouth of the Yellow Stone river... I also felt satisfied that the blood of our countrymen had been avenged.³⁹

³⁷ Nester, 184.

³⁸ McDonald to the *Washington Gazette*, September 13, 1824, in Dale Morgan, editor, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 56.

³⁹ Henry Leavenworth to the Secretary of War, "Official Report", August 15, 1823, in Dale Morgan, editor, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 58.

Leavenworth's decision to show leniency was further supported by many in the military community. General Gaines, in a letter to the Secretary of War Calhoun stated, "The victory most acceptable to an enlightened and virtuous nation is, doubtless, that which is obtained at the least expense of blood."⁴⁰ McDonald was incorrect in his evaluation of the Arikaras' attitude towards Americans. The surviving Arikara wandered the plains until they eventually settled in present day North Dakota, where the tribe still resides. The Arikara, with the exception of a few rogue bands, never again took up arms against Americans. A company of Arikara scouts even rode with Custer to Little Bighorn.⁴¹ The record is clear: Leavenworth reacted to an attack on Americans swiftly and with minimal casualties; after achieving victory, he chose to show mercy rather than destroy the Arikara. His actions won him the favor of his superiors, which led them to later trust him for critical missions.

Colonel Leavenworth's next notable success came in 1826. As the United States expanded West, a notable hole in the western frontier developed. A large stretch of the Missouri River was defended only by Fort Osage that lay far in north, and Jefferson Barracks, in St. Louis, which was much too far east to effectively guard western Missouri. When the people of Missouri, joined by the merchants of the Santé Fe Trail, pressed Congress for better military protection along the Missouri River, Congress took action.⁴² The Federal Government assigned the United States Army to build a fort to meet these needs, and Henry Leavenworth was assigned to plug the gap in the line. In March of 1827, Henry Leavenworth received orders to "ascend the Missouri...to choose a location on the left bank of the river, twenty miles above or below the

⁴⁰ Nester, 186.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴² J. Patrick Hughes, *Fort Leavenworth Gateway to the West* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 2000), 1.

point where the Little Platte River entered it, as a site for a permanent cantonment.”⁴³ He set out with four companies of the Sixth Infantry Regiment. When he arrived on the left bank of the river, which marked the western edge of Missouri, he soon realized there was no suitable site for a base.⁴⁴ The topography was poor. The low river banks were susceptible to flooding and poor for agriculture. If the Missouri flooded, it would be difficult for him to assist or control those who were trading or caravanning in Indian Territory. Recognizing these adversities, he made the innovative decision to cross the river to find a more favorable location.⁴⁵

He found a ridge of bluffs that sat high above the river, roughly 100-150 feet. The highest point of the area, it naturally commanded both the surrounding plains and the mighty Missouri. Leavenworth knew because of their elevation, the bluffs were easily defensible, and provided an excellent vantage point of the area. The river was also relatively narrow at this point, roughly 300 feet.⁴⁶ This would make transporting personnel, animals, and equipment significantly easier. Many frontier forts had to be self-sufficient due to their extended position from other Americans.⁴⁷ The location of the bluffs also offered a wide swath of potential farmland to the southwest that could be easily cultivated. Perhaps most importantly, the location was on the same side of the river as the Santé Fe trail, which would allow the base to act as both a gateway to the southwest and to react to any future conflicts much more quickly. Recognizing the benefits of the western bank, Leavenworth disregarded the specifics of his orders, and on May 8th, 1827 planted

⁴³ Maynard Downes, *History of Fort Leavenworth while a Frontier Post* (Madison: Library of the University of Wisconsin, 1913), 4.

⁴⁴ Elvid Hunt and Edward Leonard King. *History of Fort Leavenworth 1827-1927* (Fort Leavenworth: The General Service Schools Press, 1926), 20.

⁴⁵ George H Walton, *Sentinel of the Plains: Fort Leavenworth and the American West* (Englewood Cliff: Prentice-Hall 1973), 13.

⁴⁶ Downes, 4.

⁴⁷ Nester, 162.

his flag officially establishing Cantonment Leavenworth.⁴⁸ By doing so, he established the first permanent American settlement in present day Kansas. Picking the perfect location was crucial, but ensuring that the cantonment was successful was just as challenging.

In the spring of 1828, Leavenworth took a number of steps to ensure that Cantonment Leavenworth succeeded as an effective frontier post. Congress did not allocate money for supplies, so Leavenworth petitioned the Quartermaster Department of the Army and received supplies to erect humble structures.⁴⁹ He also put the soldiers to work planting crops to be harvested in the fall. They also recruited Osage and other Native Americans to help hunt buffalo.⁵⁰ A post office was established to ensure timely and consistent communication with the general population and military administration. This would be the only post office in present day Kansas until 1843 when an office was established at Fort Scott.⁵¹ The post office instantly made the fort the regional hub for everyone in the area. It gave settlers, soldiers, and traders a destination. Later, when the area became more populated, settlers traveling to the base to check for mail would purchase goods from the general store, and come to rely on the base as a primary social system. To assist with the mail, supply issues, and connect the base with the rest of America, Leavenworth had a ferry established at the Platte falls, near where the Little Platte River met the Missouri. The ferry ran from Cantonment Leavenworth to the quickly booming riverside town of Liberty, Missouri, some 35 miles to the south.⁵²

⁴⁸ Hughes, 3.

⁴⁹ Downes, 7.

⁵⁰ R. B. Mason, "Feats in the West," *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*, (1835).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Downes, 8.

In the spring of 1829, four companies of the Sixth Infantry Regiment successfully accompanied a twenty-five wagon caravan along the Santé Fe Trail to the border of Mexico. This marked the first of many voyages across the Great Plains that passed through the portal of Cantonment Leavenworth. It also marked a historic shift away from St. Louis and the protection of Jefferson Barracks, which had traditionally served as the starting point for explorations west.⁵³ St. Louis was still the staging point to gather supplies and served as the headquarters for many companies, but Cantonment Leavenworth became the filter through which people entered and exited Indian Territory, which attracted the administrators tasked with managing the lands west of the Missouri. The base was off to a quick start.

John Dougherty, of the Council Bluffs Indian Agency, noticed Leavenworth's success in rapidly expanding the base. He decided that Cantonment Leavenworth was a more effective location for an agency and began operating out of the base.⁵⁴ The agency at Cantonment Leavenworth was entrusted with ensuring positive relations with the Ottoe, Pawnee, Maha, Ponea, other tribes of the Upper Missouri. It also managed the tribes of the imminent area including the Delawares, Kickapoo, and along the Kansas River: the Kanza. Major General Gaines also saw the value of the cantonment and placed one of only five Indian Department Superintendents there, with the task of managing every Indian Agent along the Missouri River and all of its dependent streams.⁵⁵ With both the superintendent and an Indian Agency, Cantonment Leavenworth became a licensing and administrative hub for trappers and traders heading west.⁵⁶

⁵³ "Expedition to the Pacific" *The Missouri Gazette*, (1813).

⁵⁴ Downes, 32.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁶ Hiram Martin Chittenden and Stallo Vinton, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York: Press of the pioneers, Inc., 1935), 623.

The increased contact with Americans proved deadly for many of the Plains Indians tribes. On May 11th, 1832 the *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald* featured an article that noted, "I wish I was capable of describing to you, in its true colors, even half the wretchedness which I witnessed during the few days I spent with the Pawnees... They were estimated at 10,000 souls... they have lost nearly half their number."⁵⁷ The agency did spare many of the Native Americans from Small Pox. The Otoe, who had been fully vaccinated, only suffered three fatalities when exposed to the same strain of the disease.⁵⁸ Leavenworth's expert placement of the Cantonment Leavenworth at its commanding position of the west side of the Missouri River, linked with his rapid steps to expand the base quickly made it a major central hub for entrepreneurs, military operations and Indian Agents. Colonel Leavenworth's success helped further his career, making him the prime candidate for a historic expedition west.

In 1833, Congress and the United States Military organized what would become the most lethal unit in their arsenal: cavalry. The newly promoted Brigadier General Henry Leavenworth was chosen to lead the newly formed cavalry on largest military expedition of the year.⁵⁹ The cavalry, formally called dragoons because of the tactic of dismounting to fight, were crisply armed with a sword, pistol, and the most modern weaponry of the day: a carbine. The carbine was able to fire cartridges, and it reloaded with a simple caulking motion. It allowed for a much faster rate of fire than a rifle, was much more accurate than a musket, and only weighed seven and a half pounds, making it perfect for long travel.⁶⁰ In 1834, the United States Government needed to establish a presence in the Southern Plains due to a number of Native American

⁵⁷ "Small Pox Among Indians," *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald*, (1832).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ S. C. Stambaugh, "Expedition of the Dragoons to the West," *Niles Weekly Register*, (1834).

⁶⁰ "United States Dragoons," *Niles Weekly Register* 89, no. 389, (August 2, 1834).

conflicts and no formal treaties with the tribes responsible. Congress, eager to test their newly formed unit, slated the 1st Dragoons for the expedition. *The Niles Weekly Register* printed the reasoning for the expedition on August 2, 1834:

The object of the expedition is to give the wild Indians some idea of our power, and to endeavor, under such an imposing oree, to enter into conferences with them, to warn those Indians who have been in the habit of robbing and murdering our people who trade among them, of the dangers to which they will be exposed in case they continue their depredations and massacres.⁶¹

Specifically, the goal of the mission was to make contact and establish a treaty with the powerful Pawnee and Comanche tribes. The soldiers were also to demand the return of an American boy, James Martin, who had been kidnapped while buffalo hunting with his father, a judge who died in the attack.⁶² The dragoon companies headed south and linked up in present day Oklahoma.

On July 20th 1834, Leavenworth set out from Fort Gibson with the full regiment of 500 dragoons.⁶³ He had many Native Americans with him: Cherokees, Delawares, Comanche, Osage, and Pawnee, all to serve as interpreters and guides.⁶⁴ His destination, 200 miles to the west, across the Cross Timbers region, was the False Washita River. The route took them through the friendly territory of the “half-civilized” Creek, Cherokee, and Osage tribes.⁶⁵ Possibly because of the size of their force, but also because of the peaceful nature of the tribes, the Dragoons made peaceful contact with many small villages. The Cross Timbers region, a strip of land that runs from North Texas to Southern Kansas, is notoriously difficult terrain. In addition to the summer heat and hard labor, the regiment fell gravely ill. One man noted:

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Albert G. Brackett, *History of the United States Cavalry* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865), 36.

⁶³ *Dragoon Campaigns to the Rocky Mountains*, 143.

⁶⁴ Louis Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons in the Mississippi Valley* (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1917), 35.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 133.

What the regiment of dragoons has suffered from sickness...is unexplained in the country and almost incredible...A great many died...The disease seems to be entirely of a bilious nature, and contracted by exposure to the sun, and the impurity of the water which...we were obliged to use.⁶⁶

Those who fell sick while close to Fort Gibson, OK were sent back. To make matters worse, Leavenworth himself became ill from a broken bone injury after his horse tripped while hunting buffalo. The expedition straggled to the False Washita River. It was there that Leavenworth had to make a crucial command decision. He could push forward, complete the mission, but risk even heavier losses, or he could turn back, leave the Martin boy, and fail to make contact with the Pawnee or Comanche. He made the intelligent decision to find the middle ground by splitting and reorganizing his forces.⁶⁷ He set up a camp for the sick on the edge of the False Washita, where he and 232 others stayed.⁶⁸ He sent 252 men forward, split into six companies, under the command of Colonel Dodge.⁶⁹ The six companies left camp on the 12th of July, successfully pushed on and made contact with both the Pawnee and Comanche. Dodge started his meeting with the Pawnees by saying, “We meet you as friends, not enemies, to make peace with you...”⁷⁰ He made treaties with both and secured the release of the Martin boy.⁷¹

Leavenworth, however was not so lucky, as his fever worsened. On July 21st, 1834, he passed away.⁷² Upon hearing the news, one of his soldiers wrote, “This piece of intelligence cast a gloom over the regiment...he was a man universally beloved by those under his command.”⁷³ Colonel Dodge collected Leavenworth’s body and the men at False Washita and safely returned

⁶⁶ *Dragoon Campaigns to the Rocky Mountains*, 198.

⁶⁷ Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, 37.

⁶⁸ Brackett, 36.

⁶⁹ James I. Clark, *Henry Dodge Frontiersman* (Milwaukee: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1957), 9.

⁷⁰ Louis Pelzer, *Henry Dodge* (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1911), 101.

⁷¹ *Dragoon Campaigns to the Rocky Mountains*, 166.

⁷² Brackett, 36.

⁷³ *Dragoon Campaigns to the Rocky Mountains*, 181.

to Fort Gibson on August 15th, 1834. Of the 500 men who set out, 151 did not return.⁷⁴ The sickness that struck the regiment was unpredictable and unforeseeable. Leavenworth's crucial decision to split his forces led to a salvaging of what could have been a disastrous mission.⁷⁵

Leavenworth was a successful commander in his time, but the legacy that he left in his wake would affect the American military for decades to come. The Arikara War is considered to be the first major conflict with a Great Plains tribe. The engagement was studied and examined for years to come and the command decisions Leavenworth made were supported by the military community.⁷⁶ Things could have gone much worse. His caution led to almost no casualties of American regulars, a quality that Custer did not show at the Battle of Little Big Horn years later. His mercy led to the survival of the Arikara people, instead of indiscriminate killing like what was seen during the Wounded Knee Massacre. Leavenworth's expert placement and development of Fort Leavenworth helped it grow. It is one of few frontier forts that stood the test of time. Today Fort Leavenworth is known as the "Brain of the Army" and is home to the Command and General Staff College.⁷⁷ Perhaps his largest legacy was the United States Cavalry itself. The dragoon expedition was the American people's litmus test of cavalry, and had it been unsuccessful, the next 60 years of plains warfare might have looked drastically different.⁷⁸ Instead, his protégé, Colonel Henry Dodge, would drastically develop and expand the role of cavalry on the plains. Henry Leavenworth achieved a great deal in his life, from his success in the War of 1812 to becoming a dominant force on the plains, but what truly makes him great is the way he touched the lives of his soldiers. Shortly before his death he was described as,

⁷⁴ Brackett, 37.

⁷⁵ Pelzer, *Henry Dodge*, 112.

⁷⁶ Nester, 202.

⁷⁷ Partin, 21.

⁷⁸ *Dragoon Campaigns to the Rocky Mountains*, 107.

“combining most happily the dignity of the commander with the moderation and humanity of the Christian, and the modest urbane deportment of the scholar and gentleman; all love him, for all have access to him, and none that know him can help but love him.”⁷⁹ Let us remember Henry Leavenworth as his soldiers did.

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⁷⁹ Ibid, 105.

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