



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Prairie Generals and Colonels at Cantonment Missouri and Fort Atkinson

Full Citation: Virgil Ney, "Prairie Generals and Colonels at Cantonment Missouri and Fort Atkinson," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 51-76.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1975Generals.pdf>

Date: 8/25/2015

Article Summary: This article presents the history of Fort Atkinson (at the present-day town of Fort Calhoun, Nebraska) as well as biographies of General Henry Atkinson and General Henry Leavenworth, commanders at the fort at different times between 1820 and 1827.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Henry Atkinson, Paul Wilhelm, James O Pattie, Marvin F Kivett, Gabriel H Manigault, George Izard, John C Calhoun, Jacob Brown, Mary Ann Bulitt, Edward Graham Atkinson, Benjamin W Atkinson, Alexander Macomb, Henry Leavenworth, Henry Dodge, Stephen W Kearny, Elizabeth Eunice Morrison, Electa Knapp, Harriet Lovejoy, Jesse Henry Leavenworth, Andrew Talcott, Nathaniel S Harris

Keywords: War of 1812; Yellowstone Expedition; Panic of 1819; Battle of Bad Axe; Sauk; Winnebago; Battle of Chippewa; Battle of Fort George, Canada; Pawnee; Comanche

Photographs / Images: General Henry Atkinson portrait; Diagram of Cantonment in two-sections; reconstructed period setting showing a typical room in officers' quarters at Fort Atkinson (in 1975, an exhibit at the Nebraska State Historical Society Museum in Lincoln); General Henry Leavenworth, commander at Fort Atkinson between 1825 and 1825; Map of the Missouri Bottom on which Cantonment Missouri was located in 1820, drawn by Army Engineer Lieutenant Andrew Talcott; portrait of Andrew Talcott; monument to General Leavenworth at Fort Leavenworth Cemetery

PRAIRIE GENERALS AND COLONELS AT CANTONMENT MISSOURI AND FORT ATKINSON

By **VIRGIL NEY**

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE FORT

Fort Atkinson was established as a result of Americans' concern over the control of the vast trans-Mississippi West. After the War of 1812 the fur trade in this area was becoming an important source of wealth for the country, but it was a high risk venture due in part to the frequent and costly clashes between trapping parties and the Indians. There was also the fear that the British were encroaching into the territory from the north. These factors lent support to a plan to establish a chain of permanent military forts to consolidate the nation's hold on the American West. The Army was ordered to implement the plan, and in March of 1818 the first contingent of troops was sent out as part of what was popularly called the Yellowstone Expedition.

A year later the 6th Infantry, commanded by Colonel Henry Atkinson, ascended the Missouri River in a flotilla of keelboats and steamboats. They were joined by the troops of the Rifle Regiment near modern Leavenworth, Kansas, which increased the Yellowstone Expedition to a force of approximately 1,100 men. It was early in October when they reached Council Bluffs located on the west side of the Missouri River near present-day Fort Calhoun, Nebraska. Here Atkinson ordered the construction of a large fort which was named Cantonment Missouri. He reported that it was not built on the bluffs, which had "been so

highly recommended by Lewis & Clark, and others", but "in a rich bottom on the margin of the river." Among his reasons for this choice was the "difficulty of getting up timber for buildings & fuel (there being no wood only in the bottom below) no water but that to be brought up from the river & the position so exposed to the bleak winds, as to deny, almost, existence during the cold season".¹

The expedition wintered at Cantonment Missouri. A major portion of the force expected to continue their ascent of the river as soon as it was free of ice, but the economy and politics altered the plan. There was growing opposition to the politicians who conceived the expedition, and the economy was suffering from the Panic of 1819. As a result, Congress refused to appropriate funds for the construction of additional forts on the upper Missouri, and the Yellowstone Expedition remained at Council Bluffs.

On June 11, 1820, disaster struck Cantonment Missouri. A devastating flood swept down the river valley, and when the waters receded twenty days later, two feet of sand had been deposited in the fort, and the barracks which formed the east wall were completely swept away. Construction of a new installation was immediately begun, this time on the bluffs well above the treacherous flood plain.² This was to become Fort Atkinson.

The new fort consisted of officers' quarters and enlisted men's barracks, which completely enclosed a parade ground approximately 600 feet square. The only access into the compound was through large, solidly built gates. Additional protection was provided by blockhouses or bastions on the northwest and southeast corners, which contained heavy cannons. Fortunately the need never arose to fire these weapons in defense of the post.

Near the garrison were the quarters and workshops for the blacksmiths, carpenters, laundresses, bakers, and all of the other personnel necessary to supply and maintain a very nearly self-sufficient outpost. There was also a council house for the Indian agent and a sutler's store in the vicinity. Nearby, there were large fields where a great variety of vegetables were grown, as well as wheat for bread and grain to feed the flocks of chickens and herds of cattle and swine.

During the seven years of its existence, Fort Atkinson was the focal point of a million square miles of American territory. Visitors to the post ranged from European nobility such as Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Wuerttemberg,³ to the neophyte James O. Pattie,⁴ who came all the way from Kentucky to make his fortune in the fur trade only to discover that a trader must be licensed by the government. The licenses were issued only in St. Louis. Visitors to the fort were frequent and, depending on their social status, might be invited to one of the frequent formal banquets, balls, or concerts which were held with all the style and pomp of a big eastern city.

The enlisted men at the post divided their time between farming and military drill. Only once, in 1823, was a major military campaign launched from the fort in retaliation for an Indian attack on a party of fur trappers. During off-duty hours an enlisted man could make use of the post library, if he could read. Hunting, fishing, and billiards were some of the popular pastimes and, if court-martial records are any indication, so was excessive drinking.

Orders were issued to abandon Fort Atkinson in the spring of 1827, and on June 6 the Army and the support personnel boarded their keelboats bound for St. Louis. The old fort was left to the mercy of the elements and to scavengers, who helped themselves to lumber, brick, and any other useable item. Slowly a layer of loess covered the site, sealing the ruins for more than a century.

In 1956 a team of archeologists, led by Marvin F. Kivett of the Nebraska State Historical Society, began uncovering the remains of the fort. In following years Society personnel would direct other excavations there. This work has provided important information on the physical appearance of the post and has given useful clues concerning the wide range of activities which were carried out there. Since the fort was inhabited for a relatively short time, the artifacts recovered there will be useful in determining the time of occupation of other early historical sites. Today Fort Atkinson is a Nebraska State Park, and a partial reconstruction of the old post is underway by the State Game and Parks Commission.

INTRODUCTION

In any military organization the commanding officer, as the direct representative of the head of state, is responsible for everything the unit does—or does not do. At Fort Atkinson the post was fortunate in having commanding officers, who were for their rank—with one exception—the finest leaders in the U.S. Army at that time. Where did they come from, how were they appointed, what did they do, and where did they go after their tour of this frontier outpost? Did Fort Atkinson contribute to their future careers? What did they contribute to Fort Atkinson and to the officers and men under their commands? These are a few of the questions to be posed when the commanding officers at Fort Atkinson are mustered and reviewed by history. Fort Atkinson served as a practical command and staff school for several U.S. Army officers who were to become historical personages as the nation developed and the frontier moved to the West.¹

In a sense the commanding officer is left very much alone to carry out his mission. Under the military system he is left to his own resources. The credo of higher authority in the U.S. Army has always been, "Tell an officer *what* he is to do—but not *how* to do it." Hence the commanding officer is forced to draw freely upon his own experience, education, philosophy, and training. He must also assimilate the knowledge of others with his own if he is to accomplish his assignment to the satisfaction of his superiors and the contentment and effectiveness of his subordinates. There is nothing in civil life comparable to the responsibility the commanding officer of a military unit or post must assume. The authority vested in the commanding officer stems by virtue of his commission from the President of the United States and is to be respected and obeyed. Hence, the successful commanding officer in his interpretation of orders, policy, and military doctrine must always be as correct and as efficient as possible. This condition, of course, is limited by the personal and human factors bound up within his being: his intelligence, his physical well-being, his personality, and, above all, his philosophy of life. Fort Atkinson was fortunate in having for its first commanding officer Colonel Henry Atkinson of the 6th Regiment of Infantry.

GENERAL HENRY ATKINSON

Henry Atkinson was born in Person County, North Carolina, in 1782. His father was a planter who had settled in the area in the 18th century and participated in the Revolutionary War as a major in the North Carolina militia. Later he was prominent in local and state politics as the justice of the peace and at legislative levels. He owned 6,100 acres in Caswell and Person counties. Tobacco was the principal crop, but livestock and foodstuffs were also raised.²

After the death of his father in 1792, Atkinson stayed on the plantation enjoying the life of a young planter. He pursued the limited educational pattern of his region, but his later writings reflect a thorough training in spelling and grammar. He learned to ride, shoot, hunt, and the social amenities, through which he became well known to the large circle of his father's friends. He fell heir to his family's position, both social and political. During this period his interests centered on farming and basic mechanics, activities which were to be significant to the success of his military career.³

Among Atkinson's friends were the elected representatives sent to Washington from his state. These political friends served him well, and in July, 1808, gained him a commission in a newly formed Army regiment. A young lawyer from Virginia, Winfield Scott, was tendered a commission as captain of light artillery at about the same time. Atkinson's and Scott's military careers were to cross many times during the next quarter of a century.⁴

During this period the fledgling infantry captain, who was without prior military experience, performed such duties as recruiting and moving soldiers by ocean transport from Norfolk, Virginia, to New Orleans. Atkinson came under the command of Brigadier General James Wilkinson, whose service dated from the American Revolution. Thus began his association with the great and the near-great then emerging upon the American military stage. Unfortunately, this was a dark era in the Army's history: the state of the military art was primitive. Officers with few exceptions were not well qualified to command. Further, they did not know how to teach recruits the elements of sanitation and hygiene, the lack of which tragically reduced Army effectiveness.

This varied experience was to be invaluable to the young captain years later when he was establishing his own post on the Missouri River. The usual routine of a frontier Army officer occupied the next few years for Captain Atkinson: troop movements, training, and administration, and drill—all of it based largely upon the *Blue Book* of Baron von Steuben written at Valley Forge in 1778. (There was a dearth of effective Army manuals at that period of our history.) At New Orleans in 1812, Atkinson and his troops were caught in the warlike attitudes evidenced by the commercial embargo requested by President James Madison against Britain. He was promoted to major after filling the post of deputy inspector general on the staff of General Wilkinson. Involved with General Wilkinson and his expedition against the Spanish at Mobile and West Florida, he served as acting deputy adjutant general and inspector general and earned the confidence of his superior.⁵

On May 24, 1813, Atkinson was promoted temporary lieutenant colonel and assistant inspector general of the 7th Military District at New Orleans. However, on August 1, 1813, before he could enter upon his new duty, he was ordered to Washington. Upon arrival at the capital city, he was assigned to the staff of Brigadier General Wade Hampton, commanding general of the 9th Military District at Burlington, Vermont, as inspector general in the temporary rank of colonel. Hence, within five years Atkinson had advanced from captain to colonel—real progress on the promotion ladder of that day, even if the colonelcy was only temporary.⁶

During this period Atkinson had learned the rudiments of his profession and had made friends of high and low rank. In practice he had solved the problem of food, clothing and shelter for his troops. Further, he had learned a great deal about logistics, command, and organization in the expedition against the Spanish. Like all professional officers, Atkinson was fearful that the War of 1812, which had been in progress for a year and one-half, might pass by him without a chance to command troops in battle, since this failure would be detrimental to his career and might prevent his rising to general-officer rank.

The War of 1812 found Henry Atkinson appointed colonel of one of the newly raised regiments, the 45th Infantry, but this assignment was immediately changed to the command of the



General Henry Atkinson served between 1819 and 1820 at Cantonment Missouri. When a new fort was built nearby on the bluffs in 1820, it was named for Atkinson.

37th Infantry Regiment. This assignment meant that Atkinson's post of inspector general must be vacated, but he received no orders and remained at Plattsburgh, New York, where he became involved in personal conflict with Captain Gabriel H. Manigault, aide-de-camp of Commanding General George Izard.⁷

The result was that Atkinson and Manigault fought a duel in which Atkinson was wounded in the leg and his opponent was unharmed. Army policy and generally unfavorable attitude toward duelling caused the young colonel to be placed in arrest while hospitalized. His direct plea for clemency to the secretary of war was effective in having the charge dropped. After recovery, Atkinson proceeded to Fort Trumbull, near New London, Connecticut, where he took command of the 37th Regiment. There he organized and trained the new unit and began to recruit members. While he was training at Fort Trumbull, the battles at Fort Erie and New Orleans were fought, during which his regiment built better defenses in the New London area.⁸

In 1815 the war ended and some war-time units, including Atkinson's regiment, were disbanded. Reduced to a low-level of strength, the Army faced the problem of who should be retained and who should be mustered out. Atkinson's war service had not been distinguished by participation in combat operations. Hence, his chances of being retained were, at best, uncertain. Most appointments to the reorganized Regular Army were given to battle-experienced officers. But a record of staff duty, administrative service as inspector general, and training experience, as well as friendship with several generals, caused his retention. He was appointed a colonel of the reorganized 6th Infantry Regiment, a consolidation of several war-time regiments. Henry Atkinson's service with the 6th Infantry began May 17, 1814, and he was to be identified with it until his death in July, 1842.⁹

The order he issued upon assuming command of the 6th at Fort Lewis, New York, August 27, 1815 indicates his philosophy of command:

Colonel Atkinson assumes the command of the Sixth Regiment of Infantry, which the President of the United States has been pleased to confide to his care. In entering upon his duty he is not unconscious of the importance and responsibility of

the charge; but he embraces it with confidence, relying as he does upon the aid which he will derive from the ability and experience of his field and staff and platoon officers, as well as upon the good character of the troops composing the regiment.¹⁰

Assigned to Plattsburgh, the 6th Regiment served in such engineering tasks as road-building and construction of fortifications along the Canadian border. This was an opportunity for Atkinson to test his leadership and command abilities. To hold troops together in non-military duties required a thorough understanding of the need for and the value of morale-building activities; accordingly he formed a regimental band and started a library. On his part he developed a paternal interest in the welfare of the soldier. This attribute Atkinson retained throughout his life. Indeed, his real understanding of the American soldier and his ability to command him, as well as his ability to keep men engaged in non-military tasks, were largely responsible for his regiment's selection in 1819 for a mission to the western frontier—the Yellowstone Expedition.¹¹

Major General Jacob Brown, commanding general of the Northern Division, under whom Atkinson served in 1818, issued the following order commending the 6th Infantry for its services:

	Headquarters Northern Division	
Division Orders:	Brownville [New York]	8 Oct. 1818.
	<i>Extract</i>	

The Sixth Regiment of Infantry was found employed on the fortifications at Rouse's Point, and although devoted exclusively to labor for the previous three months, its appearance confirmed the high reputation it has always sustained.

The labor of the troops of this corps has been of a high and important character.

The country at large is indebted to them for their activity in fortifying one of the most important avenues, and the formation of the road from Plattsburgh to Chattaquay will be a service of long and grateful remembrance to the district where they have been stationed.

The Commanding General is gratified to state that these important services have been rendered without the least deterioration of their excellence as soldiers.

By Order of Major General Brown:

(signed) R. M. Harrison
Aide de Camp¹²

The movement of the 6th Infantry Regiment to the Missouri River from Plattsburgh was one of the most ambitious large-scale troop movements undertaken by the United States Army, up to this time. While the Lewis and Clark Expedition traversed many more miles enroute to the Pacific, its numbers were small and participants were explorers, not troops moving

with impedimenta. The following extract will explain the part played by Atkinson in the Yellowstone Expedition:

In 1819 he was assigned to the command of the "Yellowstone Expedition," a grandiose project, fathered by the secretary of war, John C. Calhoun, for taking an army of 1,100 men to the mouth of the Yellowstone, as a warning to the Indians and the British fur traders. In September, Atkinson and his force reached old Council Bluffs, in the present Nebraska, where a post was established, named Camp Missouri, later renamed Fort Atkinson, and still later Fort Calhoun. Nothing further came of the project except the exploratory journeys, in the summer of 1820, of Major Stephen H. Long to Pike's Peak and of Capt. Matthew J. Magee to the mouth of the Minnesota. Returning to St. Louis, Atkinson was put in command of the right wing of the Western Department, with the rank of Brigadier General (appointed May 13, 1820) but on the revision of army ratings in 1821, he was reappointed Colonel of the 6th Infantry, with his brigadier-generalship reduced to a brevet.¹³

While the mission of the Yellowstone Expedition has been covered in some detail elsewhere in this work, it will be of interest to recount briefly the activities:

Proceeding overland as far as Pittsburgh, Pa., the regiment embarked on May 8, 1819. The men were housed in small transport boats, ten in number, which were propelled by means of oars and sails. The long journey by water at that early period was one fraught with considerable novelty and peril. The country through which the little flotilla glided was, for the most part, an unbroken wilderness, containing but a few scattered settlements and trading-posts. The expedition reached Belle Fontaine, Mo. after a month spent almost continuously on the water. Remaining at Belle Fontaine until July 4, the regiment once more embarked and in September reached Council Bluffs. Here preparations were made for spending the winter and for providing means of defense against the Indians, who at times assumed a hostile attitude. The Rifle Regiment, which was stationed several hundred miles up the Missouri (above St. Louis), was joined to Colonel Atkinson's command.

Thus was established the first fort west of the Missouri River, and around it sprung up the earliest settlement in Nebraska—the original Council Bluffs—twenty miles distant from the Council Bluffs of the present day and sixteen miles from the present site of Omaha.¹⁴

The Yellowstone Expedition, due to the failure of the contractor to provide dependable transportation and sufficient rations for troops, became the subject of a congressional investigation. The President through the Secretary of War ordered it to proceed no farther than the Council Bluffs. Henry Atkinson's reputation was hardly tarnished as result of the near failure of the expedition; in fact, in May, 1820, he was promoted to brigadier general.¹⁵

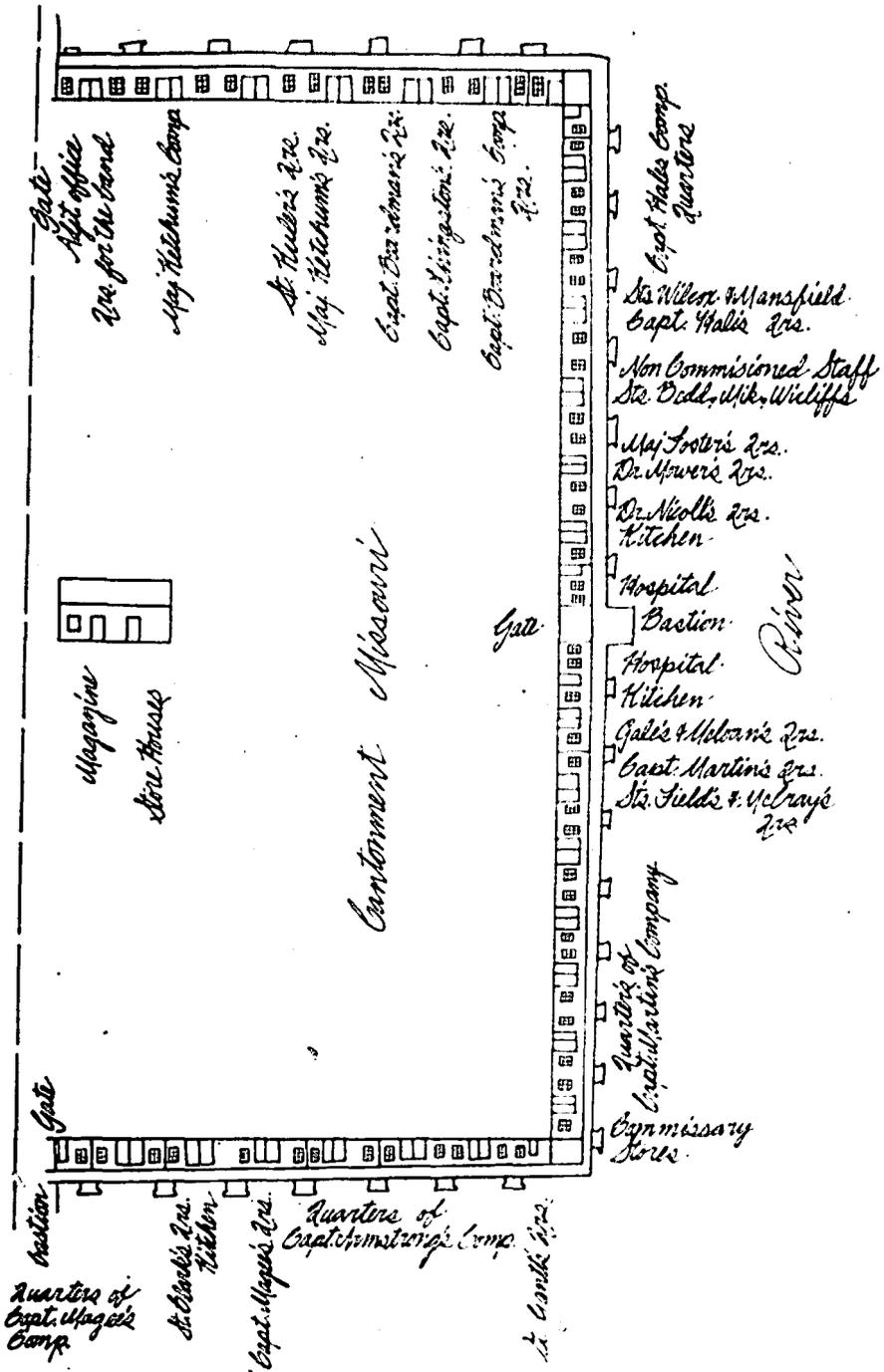
Turning the command of Cantonment Missouri over to Lieutenant Colonel Willoughby Morgan of the Rifle Regiment, Colonel Atkinson moved to St. Louis as commander of the right wing of the Western Department. His duties were of necessity more broad and varied than those of a post commander, and at

St. Louis he became enmeshed in Indian affairs and trading activities. Further, he commanded several posts and camps, including Fort Smith, Arkansas Territory; Fort Crawford, Wisconsin; Fort Osage on the Missouri River; and Cantonment Missouri at Council Bluffs on the west bank of the Missouri.

Colonel Atkinson had just become established at St. Louis when bad news began to come in from Cantonment Missouri. Because of the lack of fresh vegetables in the ration, spoiled meat, and water-soaked flour, troops were overtaken by an epidemic of scurvy. Despite the efforts of surgeons, soldiers in garrison were dying. Fortunately, the command of Lieutenant Colonel Willoughby Morgan was able to survive this catastrophe, although over 150 soldiers died during the winter of 1819-1820.¹⁶ General Atkinson, upon learning that troops at the Bluffs were suffering from scurvy and other diseases, including malnutrition and dysentery, dispatched additional keelboats laden with proper foods, antiscorbutics, vegetables, and fresh meat to the stricken post.¹⁷

Atkinson himself arrived at Council Bluffs on June 14 to determine the condition of the troops after the ravages of scurvy. He found that the Missouri River had driven the now recovered 6th Regiment and the Rifle Regiment out of Cantonment Missouri. Prudently they had moved about two miles south to the higher ground of the Council Bluff and were engaged in building a new post of cottonwood logs and stone quarried from the area. Atkinson, promoted to brigadier general only a day before his arrival, remained at the Bluffs overseeing construction. At this juncture by order of General Atkinson, the troops began farming operations concurrently with building activities. Because of the uncertainty of the supply system, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, a regular correspondent of the new general, agreed with Atkinson that the troops could support themselves by hunting game and farming.¹⁸

Thus General Atkinson and his troops began the first agricultural activities attempted by white men in what was to become Nebraska.¹⁹ Farming by the soldiers was more than a means of survival. It demonstrated that the soil and climate were conducive to agricultural development and that prior reports terming the area a sterile and bleak desert were unfounded.²⁰ General Atkinson also introduced hogs, milk cows, and other



This two-sectioned map of Cantonment Missouri, slightly altered for clarity, is from the journal of Surgeon John Gale of the Rifle Regiment. Officers' quarters and enlisted men's barracks are shown. The cantonment measured approximately 560 feet on each side. North is toward the top of the map. (See page 73 for another drawing.)

livestock. The post thereafter had fresh meat and a milk supply.

One of Atkinson's strong points was his ability to deal with Indians. Interestingly, he had no prior experience in Indian affairs, yet because of his demeanor and philosophy of command he became an apt negotiator. In several instances he held councils at the post on the Council Bluffs. Eventually, in 1825 he headed the expedition from Fort Atkinson which did reach the Yellowstone River.²¹

After the completion of the post at Council Bluffs, the secretary of war directed that the works be named Fort Atkinson as signal tribute to the services of Henry Atkinson in furthering and stabilizing the military frontier. That it was unusual at the time for a military post to be named after a living individual indicates the high regard with which the young general was held by Washington authorities.

In 1821 Atkinson's career survived another crisis. For reasons of economy the Army retrenched and commands for general officers and colonels were limited. Atkinson was offered the post of adjutant general in Washington with the rank of colonel. General Jacob Brown, the commanding general of the Army, wished him to accept, but Atkinson did not want to serve there in a reduced rank. A command acceptable to him was that of colonel in his old regiment, the 6th Infantry at Fort Atkinson, but with the rank of brevet brigadier general. The brevet rank, an honorary one given for meritorious service or for gallantry in combat, could not be assumed by the holder unless he were in a post which called for a commander of rank equal to the brevet. If so, he then assumed the rank and drew the pay and allowances of his brevet. The Fort Atkinson command action meant he served in a reduced rank; but he was with troops, not at a desk job in Washington, and was with his regiment! Also he was still a general officer, if only by brevet.²²

For an army officer of his day, Atkinson possessed an inventive turn of mind. He was progressive in agriculture, experimenting with seed and growing methods, and extended the usage of the primitive river steamboats for transport. He was one of the first U.S. Army officers to establish mobile headquarters aboard the uncertain craft. He devised original and effective treadmill and manually operated paddle wheels

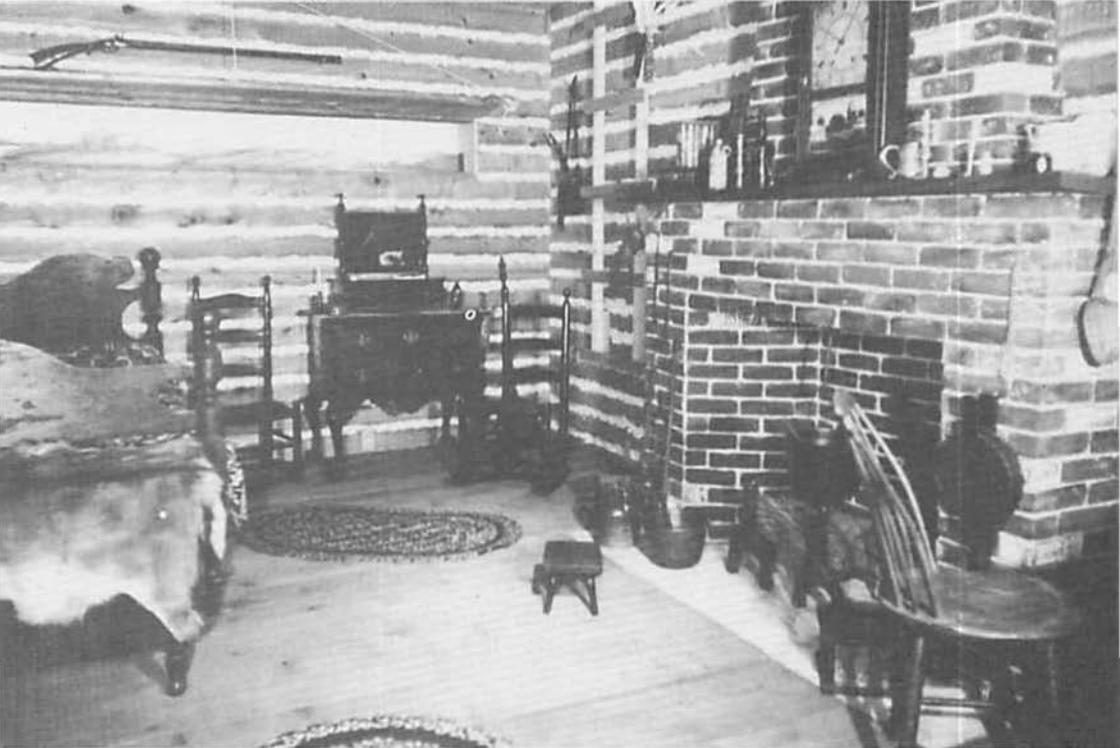
manned by troops to push heavy keelboats against the Missouri current and saw these devices used with some success on the Yellowstone trip in 1825, though the original journal of this expedition is full of reference to malfunctions of the device.²³

Diplomatic in his relations with the Indian tribes, his efforts to keep peace among the tribes and to insure proper treatment were highly effective. A cultured, refined gentleman in the uniform of his country, he nevertheless negotiated effectively with the primitive Indians. He respected the Indians, and evidence indicates they respected him as the representative of the government in Washington. He brooked no crime by Indians, white traders, or squatters, but his punishment was just when required. Affectionately the Indians called him "White Beaver."²⁴

Henry Atkinson remained unmarried until 1826, the year before the abandonment of Fort Atkinson. He then married Mary Ann Bullitt, daughter of an established Kentucky family. His marriage was a social event of the season in Louisville—the handsome brigadier general of 44 years, and his beautiful bride of 22 years.²⁵ A son Edward Graham Atkinson was born of this union. The mother and her son survived the general at his death in 1842.²⁶ In 1919 a grandson, Colonel Benjamin W. Atkinson, attended the centennial observance of Colonel Atkinson's assumption of command at Fort Atkinson on the modern-day site of the post (now Fort Calhoun).²⁷ This author met Benjamin Atkinson on that occasion.

General Atkinson's duties, after the closing of Fort Atkinson in April, 1827, were with Indian affairs and keeping order on the frontier. One of his more important assignments was to select a site for an Army infantry school, where the foot soldiers could be taught weaponry, tactics, and the theory and practice of war. His selection of a site ten miles south of St. Louis above the Mississippi River bluffs was named Jefferson Barracks in 1826 by authority of the War Department.²⁸

General Atkinson was henceforth quartered at Jefferson Barracks, where he commanded the right wing of the Western Department, as well as the Infantry School.²⁹ Atkinson's opportunity to command troops in combat finally came in August, 1832, in the Black Hawk War at the Battle of Bad Axe.



A period setting reconstruction at the Nebraska State Historical Society museum in Lincoln represents a typical room in officers' quarters at Fort Atkinson. Archeological investigations indicate fine furniture and delicate china graced some quarters.

In this action the Sauk Indian chief's warriors were decisively defeated.³⁰ It is of interest to note that famous personages such as Lieutenant Albert Sidney Johnston, later a Confederate general; Captain Abraham Lincoln, later President of the United States; Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, later president of the Confederacy, all served under his command.

In the 1840's he was assigned the removal of the Winnebago Indians from Wisconsin to Iowa. A second Fort Atkinson was established in Iowa to keep the peace between the Indian tribes on "neutral ground." The real mission was to prevent the inter-tribal warfare, which was often rife between the rival tribes. Some authorities believe that historians have not sufficiently recognized General Atkinson's contribution in keeping peace on the frontier.³¹

Upon the death of Major General Alexander Macomb, commanding general of the Army on June 25, 1841, Atkinson was thought to be in line for a permanent brigadier generalcy in place of the brevet rank he had held for almost twenty years.

But this was not to be. The great frontier general was passed over and another officer promoted. Hence, he continued with the routine command of Jefferson Barracks, while acting on occasion as a replacement for Major General Edmund P. Gaines, commanding general of the Western Department.³²

On June 12, 1842, General Atkinson became ill in his quarters at Jefferson Barracks with what was later diagnosed as "billious dysentery." He lived only two days and died on June 14. His sudden death was a shock to his family, as well as to the citizens of St. Louis, who respected the general for his many accomplishments, civic and military. With military pomp and extraordinary civic ceremonies, the general was buried in the cemetery near Jefferson Barracks. The militia was used in the ceremony because there were not enough troops at the post to form the escort of the funeral cortege.³³

The following tribute is from the pen of a historian who has recognized General Atkinson's unique contribution to the growth of the frontier and the American West: "His name is inseparably connected with the earlier conquest of the frontier, and the part he bore is equaled in importance by that of no contemporary with the possible exception of William Clark."³⁴

It is unfortunate that his grave cannot be located in the National Cemetery at Jefferson Barracks, the post he founded and commanded. He, like many of the soldiers he commanded at Fort Atkinson, lies in an unmarked grave.

GENERAL HENRY LEAVENWORTH

Henry Leavenworth, son of a Revolutionary War captain, was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1783. He lived in Delhi, New York, where he followed the custom of studying law under a prominent attorney. His mentor was Erastus Root, whose law partner Leavenworth became. Root, a brigadier general in the New York militia, was an influence in pointing the law student toward enrollment in the New York militia at the age of 17 years.³⁵

By 1812 Leavenworth had progressed to the rank of major and quartermaster on his law partner's militia brigade staff. With the threat of war with Great Britain, the regular United State Army was augmented by the addition of ten new regiments and Leavenworth received a commission as captain of

the 13th Infantry Regiment. He was engaged in training and recruiting until transferred to the 25th Infantry Regiment. During his service with the 25th, he took part in an invasion of Canada and participated as a company commander with distinction and bravery in the Battle of Fort George, Canada.³⁶

In August, 1813, he was promoted to major and assigned to the 9th Infantry Regiment, then at Sackets Harbor, New York, a post on Lake Ontario. Soon he was in combat, not as a battalion commander but as commander of the entire 9th Regiment. In the Battle of Chippewa on July 5, 1814, under the command of Brigadier General Winfield Scott, Major Leavenworth was to play a significant role in the capture of Fort Erie and the movement into Canada. Due to heavy casualties Leavenworth found himself in command of both the 9th and the 22nd Infantry Regiments. He was brevetted lieutenant colonel.³⁷

At the end of the hostilities, Colonel Leavenworth returned to Delhi, where he had grown up and where he had gone into law. While there on a leave of absence, he was elected to the New York Legislature. By 1818 he was assigned to the 5th Infantry Regiment, then stationed at Detroit. The same year his regiment was ordered to the junction of the St. Peter and Mississippi Rivers in Minnesota Territory near the Falls of St. Anthony. Here he selected the site for Fort Snelling and began its building, a project which was completed by Colonel Josiah Snelling. In 1821 Colonel Leavenworth was transferred at his request to the 6th Infantry at Fort Atkinson as post commander.³⁸

From all available evidence Colonel Leavenworth was one of the best-educated and enlightened officers in the Army at that time. His legalistic training plus his extensive service in the field gave him a logical and dispassionate approach to the art of command. A strict but fair disciplinarian, he nonetheless had the respect of his officers and men.³⁹ He possessed a sense of humor, a rather rare quality for the age and one not found generally among stern, unbending soldiers. His orders at Fort Atkinson occasionally reflected this unusual quality. The following extract from one of his orders indicates that he had the usual quota of petty offenses to irritate him.

Head Quarters 6th Inf
 Fort Atkinson
 24 March 1823

Order

The Col Commanding is sorry to learn that there are yet left in the Regiment some individuals so far lost to all sense of honor or shame as to commit little petty thefts from the henroosts. The name of soldiers should not be so much disgraced as to apply it to such men. The name of Weasle or that of some other pestiferous animal should be applied to them.

While the thief is unknown the stain rests upon the whole corps. Every soldier therefore who values his honor or his comfort will endeavor to discover such shameless characters and bring them to justice.

H. Leavenworth
 Col. Comdg.⁴⁰

Colonel Leavenworth was a worthy successor to Brigadier General Henry Atkinson at Fort Atkinson, and his success in the military profession seemed assured, since he had proven his ability during the War of 1812. In becoming a frontier commander he was compelled to face problems not required of officers at comfortable eastern posts. The frontier required officers who could "make do" and who were innovative, and Colonel Leavenworth demonstrated that he possessed both qualities. Soldiering to him was a serious business and a way of life. He expected his subordinates to reflect the same attitude, and he brooked no interference with exercise of what he considered his legal command. Further, at Fort Atkinson in 1823 he demonstrated qualifications for independent command by moving troops against hostile Arikara villages without orders from or consultation with anyone.⁴¹ He solved a difficult situation and assured the safety of frontier citizens. Colonel Leavenworth's swift action was commended by the department commander, the general-in-chief, the secretary of war, and the President of the United States.⁴²

In 1825 Leavenworth was promoted to colonel and assigned to command the 3rd Infantry Regiment at Green Bay Barracks, Wisconsin. He left his post on the Missouri River to assume a more prestigious command, but his imprint on Fort Atkinson was a lasting one. Whenever Fort Atkinson is mentioned, Leavenworth's name always comes to mind—as well as that of General Atkinson. Colonel Leavenworth had grown professionally at Fort Atkinson. Like his predecessor, he had furthered the idea that the area had the potential of a great



*General Henry Leavenworth,
commander at Fort Atkinson
between 1821 and 1825.*

agricultural region. He developed Fort Atkinson into an outpost of civilization.⁴³

The portrait of General Leavenworth by American artist George Catlin shows a man of stern and commanding visage—hardly the Leavenworth described in 1833 by his friend James Hildreth in *Dragoon Campaigns*:

He is a plain looking old gentleman, tall, yet graceful, though stooping under the weight of perhaps fifty years, affable and unassuming in the society of his brother officers, mild and compassionate toward those under his command, combining most happily the dignity of the commander with the moderation and humility of the Christian, and the modest and urbane deportment of the scholar and the gentleman; all love him, for all have access to him, and none that know him can help but love him.⁴⁴

From Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, where he established the first Army Infantry School, Colonel Leavenworth was ordered in March, 1827, to ascend the Missouri River and establish a post within twenty miles of its junction with the Little Platte. Deciding on a location on the west bank, he established on September 19, 1827, a post designated Cantonment Leavenworth by War Department order. This was the origin of the now famous Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, home of the Army Command and General Staff College, a high-level tactical institution for the training of officers for high command.⁴⁵

By 1834 the dragoons, or mounted infantry, organized by Colonel Henry Dodge and Colonel Stephen W. Kearny, were

patrolling the southwestern frontier. That same year Colonel Leavenworth commanded such an expedition against Pawnee and Comanche Indians. By negotiation and without battle, he secured a treaty of peace, an accomplishment rewarded by his promotion to brevet brigadier general after ten years in the grade of colonel.⁴⁶ He died of "bilious fever" in the field at Cross Timbers, Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), four days before his promotion was announced.⁴⁷ Leavenworth's last hours were spent in an Army hospital wagon under the care of George Catlin, his friend,* and several of his distraught men and officers.** His premature death brought forth many tributes and testimonials; one of them from the secretary of war said:

It is to be regretted that the prevalence of sickness in that quarter has deprived the country of a number of valuable lives and particularly that of General Henry Leavenworth, an officer well known and esteemed for his gallant services in the late war and for his subsequent good conduct, [who] has fallen a victim to his zeal and exertion in the discharge of his duty.⁴⁸

The contribution of General Henry Leavenworth to the opening and development of the West was important and lasting. His ability to deal with the Indians prevented outbreaks of frontier warfare and their consequent terror. These, and other achievements as an administrator, military and civil, placed this frontier officer ahead of many of his contemporaries. His military professional contribution, measured by any scale, was considerable. The extract from the *U.S. Cavalry Journal* tells it well:

General Leavenworth seems to have exercised a profound influence upon the development of the standards of duty and discipline in the army of the United States during its formative period, between the reduction of 1821 and the occupation of the valley of the lower Missouri, which was completed in 1845. He was one of the first, as he was certainly one of the most active and intelligent of the small number of regimental commanders upon whom developed the duty of adopting European methods of drill, discipline, and administration to the peculiar needs of our own military service. How well this task was performed was seen a little more than ten years later in the splendid behavior of the Regular regiments in the war with Mexico. He was a man of broad and varied culture, keenly alive to the needs of the time, and fully impressed with a sense of the importance of the part the army was to play with the development of the great empire beyond the Mississippi, which had but recently been acquired, and the very boundaries of which, to say nothing of its vast resources

* See Harold McCracken, *George Catlin and the Old Frontier* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1959), 142-144, 155-160. These pages tell the story of Catlin's experiences with the dragoons in the field.

** Leavenworth was not a dragoon but as the senior officer he was in command.

and possibilities, were then practically unknown. That the settlement of the valley of the upper courses of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, comprising the states of Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, was effected peacefully and without serious friction is due largely to his foresight in preventing hostile collision, and to the rare tact and skill in dealing with the tribes whose territories were being encroached upon by the advancing settlements. It was while engaged upon the execution of a similar scheme of pacification, with reference to tribes occupying the plain region of the trans-Missouri—a duty of the highest importance, which had been intrusted to him as the best fitted, by character and capacity, for its adequate performance—that death put a termination to his useful and productive labors.⁴⁹

Upon his death near the junction of the Washita and Red Rivers, General Leavenworth's body was taken to Delhi for interment. But Henry Leavenworth's contribution to the frontier West had been too great for admirers to allow him to lie anywhere but at the scene of his greatest service. In 1902 his body was reinterred at the post he had founded—Fort Leavenworth, where an heroic but austere granite monument immortalizes his name.⁵⁰

Henry Leavenworth's private life was marked by three marriages. The first, to Elizabeth Eunice Morrison, was terminated by divorce. The second, to Electa Knapp, ended with her death. His third wife was Harriet Lovejoy, who shared the experiences of Fort Atkinson and other frontier posts with him after their marriage in 1814. He was the father of four children. His only son, Jesse Henry Leavenworth (1807-1885), born of the first marriage, was a graduate of West Point in the class of 1830. Resigning from the Army in 1836, he became a civil engineer in Chicago. But he returned to frontier duty as a colonel during the Civil War, then served three years as an Indian agent.⁵¹

In a day when the military service was marked by primitive doctrines and often crude procedures, General Leavenworth gained the reputation of being an enlightened commander. In the small and often irritating aspect of frontier garrison life, he gained a high level of performance from his men. He was adept in dealing with ignorant and unlettered enlisted men whose performance had to be brought up to a higher level. Respected by both officers and men, he has been credited with exerting a profound influence upon the Army in establishing basic standards of duty and discipline.

Lieutenant Nathaniel S. Harris, class of 1826 at West Point, wrote a tribute to General Leavenworth in the *Military and Naval Magazine of the United States*, October, 1834:

To no better hand could have been confided the sometimes conflicting interests of a regiment, for he entered into the feelings of all and, a thorough soldier himself, knew how to interpose and reconcile all. He always commanded his regiment, and they who composed it learned to appreciate, in the order and harmony which prevailed, an efficient head. While enforcing toward the officers under him all proper deference, no one ever maintained more sacredly the claims of the inferior grades to kind and considerate treatment. No rank was with him an apology for forgetting that soldiers were men. In him they have lost a friend indeed.⁵²

Harris later resigned from the Army and became one of the leading Episcopal Church leaders of his day.

In the immediate area of his service at Fort Atkinson, there is no memorial to his name. In Omaha about sixteen miles to the south of old Council Bluffs, a street has been named for him. His real memorial is the military post at Fort Leavenworth, about 250 miles south of old Fort Atkinson. Here at the oldest active post west of the Mississippi River is located the world-renowned Command and General Staff College of the United States Army's educational system and the staff of its highly professional magazine, *The Military Review*. There could be no more fitting tribute to the commanding officer of Forts Atkinson and Leavenworth over 150 years ago.



*Monument to General Leavenworth
at Fort Leavenworth Cemetery*

NOTES

FOR HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE FORT

By Richard E. Jensen, Curator of Anthropology
Nebraska State Historical Society

1. Roger L. Nichols, *The Missouri Expedition, 1818-1820, the Journal of Surgeon John Gale with Related Documents* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 117-118.
2. *Ibid.*, 87
3. Paul Wilhelm, "First Journey to North America in the Years 1822 to 1824," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, Vol. 19, Translator William G. Bek (Pierre, South Dakota, 1938).
4. James O. Pattie, *The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie of Kentucky* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1930).

FOR PRAIRIE GENERALS AND COLONELS

1. Roger L. Nichols, *General Henry Atkinson—A Western Military Career* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965). Dwight L. Clark, *Stephen Watts Kearny: Soldier of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961). Colonel Elvid Hunt and Captain Walter E. Lorence, *History of Fort Leavenworth—1827-1937* (Ft. Leavenworth: Command & General Staff School Press, 1937). Appendix Y contains copious notes upon General Leavenworth's life. Colonel Henry S. Parker, "Henry Leavenworth—Pioneer General," *Military Review*, Fort Leavenworth, L (December, 1970), No. 12. James W. Silver, *Edmund Pendleton Gaines—Frontier General* (Baton Rouge, 1949).
2. Roger Nichols, *General Henry Atkinson—A Western Military Career* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1965), 8-10.
3. *Ibid.* 11-12.
4. F. B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of The United States Army*, I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 174.
5. Nichols, *Atkinson*, 27.
6. Heitman, *Register*, 174; Nichols, *Atkinson*, 30.
7. Nichols, *Atkinson*, 40-41.
8. *Ibid.* 44-45.
9. Heitman, *Register*, 174.
10. Charles Byrne, *The Sixth United States Infantry, An Historical Sketch* (Fort Thomas, Kentucky: Regimental Press, 1893), 4.
11. *Dictionary of American Biography*, I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), 410.
12. Byrne, *Sixth U.S. Infantry*, 5.
13. *Dictionary of American Biography*, 410.
14. Elkanah Babcock, *A War History of the Sixth U.S. Infantry*, (Kansas City, Missouri: Hudson-Kimberly Co., 1903), 16-17.
15. Heitman, *Register*, 174.
16. Report of the Surgeon General, U.S.A., 1819-1820.
17. Nichols, *Atkinson*, 72.
18. *Ibid.*, 74-75.
19. The Pawnee Indians had been cultivating crops in Eastern Nebraska for over three hundred years.
20. Terry Alford, Ph.D., "Western Desert Images in American Thought, 1800-1860," Ph.D. Dissertation, Mississippi State University, 1970.

21. Nichols, *Atkinson*, 64-65. This was the Atkinson-O'fallon Expedition.
22. Heitman, *Register*, 174.
23. Nichols, *Atkinson*, 95.
24. *Ibid.* 88-89, 129.
25. *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. I, 410.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Omaha World-Herald*, October 12, 1919.
28. *Dictionary of American Biography*, I, 410.
29. Nichols, *Atkinson*, 150-151.
30. *Dictionary of American Biography*, I, 410.
31. Robert W. Frazer, *Forts of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 46-47.
32. Nichols, *Atkinson*, 219-222.
33. *Ibid.*, 221.
34. *Dictionary of American Biography*, I, 410.
35. Elvid Hunt and Walter E. Lorence, *History of Fort Leavenworth, 1827-1937*, 2nd ed. (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: The Command and General Staff School Press, 1939), 289-290.
36. Henry S. Parker, "Henry Leavenworth Pioneer General", *Military Review*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, I, No. 2, (December, 1970), 58.
37. *Ibid.*, 59.
38. Hunt and Lorence, *Fort Leavenworth*, 290.
39. Parker, "Henry Leavenworth", 63.
40. O/B 6th Infantry, March 6, 1822-October 6, 1823 (Nebraska State Historical Society).
41. *American State Papers—Military Affairs*, 586 (No. 247) Letter: Colonel Henry Leavenworth to Brigadier General Henry Atkinson, Commanding Western Department, Louisville, Kentucky, June 18, 1823, Fort Atkinson.
42. *Ibid.*, 594-597.
43. Hunt & Lorence, *Fort Leavenworth*, 290.
44. *Ibid.*, 292.
45. Parker, "Henry Leavenworth", 64.
46. Hunt and Lorence, *Fort Leavenworth*, 290-291.
47. *Ibid.*, Parker, *Henry Leavenworth*, 67.
48. Hunt and Lorence, *Fort Leavenworth*, 291.
49. George B. Davis, "General Leavenworth," *U.S. Cavalry Journal*, (1895), 26-267.
50. *Dictionary of American Biography*, XI, 80.
51. *Ibid.* Information on the Leavenworth Marriages: Elias Warner Leavenworth, *The Leavenworth Family Genealogy* (Syracuse, New York: S. G. Hitchcock and Co., 1873).
52. Nathaniel S. Harris, "Brigadier General Leavenworth" *Military and Naval Magazine of the United States*, IV (October, 1834), 101-102.