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## Article Title: A Nebraska Cavalryman in Dixie: The Letters of Martin Stowell

Full Citation: James E Potter, "A Nebraska Cavalryman in Dixie: The Letters of Martin Stowell," *Nebraska History* 74 (1993): 22-31.

URL of article: [http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1993Martin\\_Stowell.pdf](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1993Martin_Stowell.pdf)

Date: 1/26/2011

Article Summary: Sergeant Major Martin Stowell of Peru, Nebraska Territory, one of about 220 Nebraskans who served in the regiment first known as the Curtis Horse [later Fifth Iowa Cavalry], wrote a series of letters describing his army experiences to Brownville newspaperman Robert W Furnas. These letters were printed in the *Nebraska Advertiser* and are presented with background and commentary in this article.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Martin Stowell, Eliza Ann Ward, Thomas W Higginson, Anthony Burns, Samuel G Daily, John C Fremont, Experience Estabrook, Alfred Matthias, Emma Stowell, Ida Stowell, Samuel Curtis, Robert W Furnas, William Kelsey, Clarence H Gibbons, T W Tipton, Henry Duel, John McMichael, William W Lowe, Ulysses S Grant, Benjamin F Cooling, John N H Patrick, Lew Wallace, D H Geary, P M McGuire, J J Warren, Dickison

Place Names: Paris, Tennessee; Peru, Nebraska Territory; Worcester, Massachusetts; Lexington, Kentucky; Nebraska City, Nebraska Territory; Kansas; Nemaha County, Nebraska; Keokuk, Iowa; Page County, Iowa; Mills County, Iowa; Boston Barracks, Missouri; St Louis, Missouri; Macon, Georgia; Council Bluffs, Iowa; Eddyville, Iowa; St Joseph, Missouri; Rochester, Iowa; Hannibal, Missouri; Fort Heiman, Kentucky; Fort Donelson; Cairo, Illinois; Fort Heiman, Tennessee; Florence, Alabama

Keywords: Curtis Horse; Fifth Iowa Cavalry; abolitionist; "Bleeding Kansas"; Emigrant Aid Company; Republican Party; Democratic Party; *Peru Times Extra*; First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry; *Nebraska Advertiser*; "Nebraska Battalion"; Steamer *Die Vernon*; "Nebraska Cavalry"; Steamer *Hannibal*; Secesh cavalry; Texan Rangers

Photographs / Images: Martin Stowell; Mrs Martin Stowell; anti-Daily broadsheet of July 14, 1860; map of Western Tennessee, 1862; Harper's Weekly, March 1, 1862;

# A NEBRASKA CAVALRYMAN IN DIXIE: THE LETTERS OF MARTIN STOWELL

*Edited by James E. Potter*

## INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 1862, two companies of the Curtis Horse cavalry charged

through the small hamlet of Paris, Tennessee, to disperse rebels engaged in conscripting men for the Confeder-

ate army. Just outside of town, the Union troopers ran into a large force of Confederates waiting in ambush. After a thirty-minute fight, the bloodied Yankees withdrew.<sup>1</sup> Killed in the skirmish was Sergeant Major Martin Stowell of Peru, Nebraska Territory, one of about 220 Nebraskans who served in the regiment first known as the Curtis Horse, and later as the Fifth Iowa Cavalry. Before his death Stowell wrote a series of letters describing his army experiences to Brownville newspaperman Robert W. Furnas, who printed them in the *Nebraska Advertiser*.

Stowell was born January 20, 1824, in Wales, Massachusetts; by 1846 he was a shoemaker in nearby Warren. He married Eliza Ann Ward of Worcester on November 26, 1847. As a member of the Congregational Church of Worcester, Stowell came under the influence of prominent New England abolitionists, particularly the Reverend Thomas W. Higginson. In the early 1850s he participated in several "rescues" of runaway slaves, who had been arrested under the fugitive slave law. In 1854 Stowell was jailed briefly for his part in a mob's assault on the Boston courthouse to free an incarcerated former slave named Anthony Burns.<sup>2</sup>

Stowell's role in the slave rescues was only the beginning of his career as



*Martin Stowell. (NSHS-P853)*

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a political activist. He lectured to raise funds for the New England Emigrant Aid Company, which was sending free soil emigrants to "Bleeding Kansas," where the abolition and pro-slavery forces were engaged in a bloody struggle for political supremacy.<sup>3</sup> In late summer 1856 Stowell led a party of New Englanders to Kansas to found the town of Lexington.<sup>4</sup>

By October 1856 Stowell had been forced to flee Kansas and was in Nebraska City, Nebraska Territory. According to his detractors, Stowell had "engaged in plundering and stealing" to "beat the Missourians or border ruffians at their own game," and the pro-slavery forces put a price on his head.<sup>5</sup> Stowell justified his actions as necessary to protect "the virgin soil of Kansas from the wilting curse of slavery."<sup>6</sup> From Nebraska City Stowell served as fiscal agent for the Emigrant Aid Company, receiving funds from the company's donors in Massachusetts and procuring supplies to be sent to the free-soil settlers in Kansas.<sup>7</sup> He soon moved to Peru in Nemaha County, where he took a pre-emption claim on 160 acres.

Although Stowell had removed himself from the slavery battles in Kansas, he soon became embroiled in the political wars in Nebraska Territory. A financial partnership with Samuel G. Daily of Peru turned sour and led to a falling out over what Stowell termed Daily's "short sighted rascality."<sup>8</sup> Enmity between the two men resurfaced when Daily sought election on the Republican ticket as territorial delegate to Congress in 1859.

Stowell had supported John C. Fremont for president in 1856, and joined Nebraska's fledgling Republican Party, but his grudge against Daily proved stronger than party loyalty. Soon after Daily was nominated at the Republicans' Bellevue convention in August 1859, Stowell announced his own candidacy for delegate.<sup>9</sup>

Stowell's candidacy, seen locally merely as a stratagem to damage Daily's campaign, was roundly criti-



Mrs. Martin Stowell. (NSHS-P853)

cized by the Nemaha County Republican press. Leading Peru Republicans publicly censured Stowell as "a suspicious and dangerous man in the county" and charged that his candidacy was supported financially by the Democrats, whose nominee was Experience Estabrook.<sup>10</sup>

The 1859 delegate election occurred amid charges of fraud on both sides and though Estabrook was declared the winner by the Democratic canvassing board, Daily was seated by the Republican U.S. House of Representatives, which threw out disputed Estabrook votes. Stowell's efforts had no discernible effect on the election, except to keep alive the bad blood between him and Daily.

In the fall of 1860 Daily ran for reelection and Stowell again took the stump against his fellow townsman. As before, the Republican newspapers endorsed Daily and when Stowell published an anti-Daily broadsheet he styled *The Peru Times Extra*, Nemaha County Republicans read Stowell out of the party.<sup>11</sup> Following another con-

tested election Daily was again seated as delegate by the House.<sup>12</sup>

The 1860 election marked the end of Martin Stowell's brief and stormy political career. His family had joined him in Nebraska and he turned his attention to making a home for them on his claim near Peru. As war clouds gathered, Stowell tried to rouse his fellow Nebraskans to their responsibilities as citizens and patriots. In March 1861 he helped organize a volunteer military company in Nemaha City. He delivered a stirring address, which "was a very close and pertinent review of the design of those who would overthrow the government and at the close, he warmly urged upon our citizens the necessity of organizing a company to protect our homes and property."<sup>13</sup>

When Abraham Lincoln called for volunteers following the April 12 firing on Fort Sumter, hundreds of Nebraskans responded. Most enlisted in the First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry, which embarked for Missouri in July 1861. On August 22, the *Nebraska Advertiser* reported that two cavalry companies were to be formed.

Although Stowell had barely gotten his wife and two small daughters settled in Nebraska and was working hard to turn his raw quarter section into a farm, the thirty-seven-year-old Stowell felt compelled to fight for the cause to which he had devoted so much of his life. On September 19 he was among several Nemaha County men who joined a cavalry company recruited by Lieutenant Alfred Matthias of Nebraska City. Stowell was appointed first sergeant.<sup>14</sup> Eliza Stowell and his daughters, Emma and Ida, were sent back to Warren, Massachusetts, never to return to Nebraska.

The Nemaha County recruits were eventually assigned to the Curtis Horse, a polyglot unit composed of men from Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, and Missouri. The "Nebraska Battalion," consisting of Companies A, B, C, and D, was recruited at Omaha and Nebraska City and included Nebraskans

from counties along the Missouri River, and Iowans from Page and Mills counties. Many of the regimental officers were Nebraska men.

The Curtis Horse was organized at Benton Barracks near St. Louis on December 20, 1861, by order of Brigadier General Samuel Curtis. The regiment bore Curtis's name until June 25, 1862, when it was designated the Fifth Iowa Cavalry. The Fifth Iowa Cavalry, still containing many Nebraskans within its ranks, served throughout the war and was at Macon, Georgia, when hostilities ended in 1865.<sup>15</sup>

Stowell began writing to the *Nebraska Advertiser* soon after the as yet unmounted Nebraska cavalry began its trek from Omaha to Keokuk, Iowa. His letters appear here as published, with punctuation added for clarity. The editor's explanatory comments appear in italic. The first letter deals with the experiences of raw troops as they were sent off to war untrained and ill-equipped.<sup>16</sup>

#### THE LETTERS

Lewis [Ia.], Oct. 16 [1861]

R. W. Furnas, Dear Sir:

We left Omaha Saturday at noon, crossed the river and camped at Council Bluffs Saturday evening. An hour or so after, Lieut. Kelsey [William Kelsay] shot a man in town (Council Bluffs) by the name of Chapman. A personal matter was the cause, growing out of a law suit, divorce case, a child, and etc. I am not fully posted in regard to the facts, and shall express no opinion about the entire matter, presuming it will be fully investigated.<sup>17</sup>

We left Council Bluffs Sunday morning for Eddyville and expect to take to the cars there in 15 or 20 days for Keokuk. We have three teams to carry our baggage (for our company), sick, and provisions. Other companies have a like number. Our company has 86 enlisted men and 3 officers and new men are joining every day. We can take today 11 more. I am informed that there is no other full company in the squadron. It is certain, at our roll calls

and in the march, our company is one-third greater than either of the others. We have an excellent company – I do not say so because it is the fashion in such cases, but because it is a fact – morally, intellectually, and physically . . . . I hope *our* men may preserve the eminence they have thus far had, and make it felt in the decisive form . . . .

We feel deeply mortified at the seeming necessity of going through Iowa. We all wanted to go by way of Brownville or Rock Port to St. Joseph.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it is best. I have much to say but there is no time for me to write now. There are some things we deeply regret; not of a personal character, for all these things are now thrown aside for the general cause. I pity the reputation some men in high position among us are securing to themselves. They seem to forget that there is a future, or that "God is Just."

There are perhaps eighty or ninety horses in the squadron; nine-tenths of which are in Captain Patrick's company. I believe all his company have horses while most of companies B and C are on foot. I have a fine, large, white horse and have no reason to complain personally, but I feel deeply any partiality among men of equal merit.<sup>19</sup> I desire no change for myself, I occupy the best position I could to become acquainted with the company and squadron, and the nature of all the duties of the service in the squadron. I feel glad that the men of our company came in as patriots and not as office seekers . . . .

I feel a little proud for Nemaha County, not only on account of the numbers, but also of the character of the men. You can easily judge the position when I say our men have nearly half the officers in the company, aside from the commissioned officers, and there seems to be a universal feeling that our men ought to have one of those. As the "greatest good to the greatest number" is the true theory, although it may not suit one or two as well just at the moment, I am satisfied it is the safest and best way in the long

run. There is no growling among us to speak of, all are cheerful, and apparently happy. We live like fighting cocks. Our rations are ample and good. Nine-tenths of people at home live poorer than we do.

The quartermaster is still buying horses. Not being able to speak officially, I will say nothing about the way some things are managed. I would prefer the position of a private with his honorable prospects to the higher position of some others with their future prospects, if justice is done to all as I believe it will be.

I send you herewith a list of the members of our company, except a few who have joined us recently. C. H. [Clarence] Gibbons' name I see was omitted, accidentally I suppose. He ranks a sergeant, next after the quartermaster . . . .

Eddyville, Iowa,  
Sunday, October 27, 1861

We left Omaha [Stowell means Rochester, IA] Saturday at 12M for this place and reached here about one o'clock today. When we started, we had seven on the sick list; now we have but two, and both of these eat their rations. But it is not prudent to put them on duty just yet. Our men stood the march well. We have no sick among our Nemaha men. All are in good spirits and fill their places in the company and squadron with honor to themselves, the Territory, and their own county.

It is seldom I find a spare moment to write to any one and hope our friends in Nebraska may learn through your paper how we are progressing. We are to leave here tomorrow morning (Monday) at 7 o'clock. There are 87 enlisted men in our company and three commissioned officers, making ninety in all. There is now no question about our being the largest company in the squadron; and for drill, integrity, efficiency, and reliability, are acknowledged by all, high or low, to be second to no other company in the squadron. The first two, A and B, have the horses. We, C,

have but four horses, besides those belonging to the officers, and two of those were furnished for your humble servant . . .

We have good tents, provisions, and etc., and are all greasy and fat, and long to be ready for active service. Only thirty of our company have got clothing from the government . . . We left Omaha with perhaps fifty horses and purchased the others on the road. I have had to drop my pencil six times since I commenced writing this short letter, and you may judge whether I am busy or not by this. I write on my knee, and can't trouble myself to use ink. I wish to give my respects to all our friends and would be glad to write them all.

There have been some things done since we left, we don't like. One man from Company A is said to have been shot while after chickens one night, and one horse killed by accident. Facts will out.

*At Eddyville, the men boarded a train and arrived at Keokuk on October 28. The next day they began a steamboat voyage to St. Louis, where the squadron went into camp at Benton Barracks.*

Steamer *Die Vernon*, from Keokuk to St. Louis, Oct. 29, [1861]

We reached Keokuk last evening about dark, and immediately came on board this boat, which is bound for St. Louis. T. W. Tipton came on board at Quincy, and Strickland and others just came on from Hannibal, where our boat is now lying for freight and etc.<sup>20</sup> We shall probably leave in a few moments. From all I can gather, I fear we may be detained in St. Louis for a time. I long to hasten on to Fremont, and add my might in driving the Confederates, Price, McCulloch, and etc., from Missouri.<sup>21</sup>

We passed Athens, Mo., yesterday, where Green and Moore had their engagement.<sup>22</sup> There were about four hundred troops marching through the streets with drums and banners; but it

# PERU TIMES.---EXTRA.

Peru, N. T., July 14, 1860.

A rich scene occurred here on Wednesday evening last. It seems a few days before Daily's return home, the Republicans of this place, acting from the unbiased impulse of their own judgment, wished to organize a Club; and after giving notice to every Republican in town, and securing a full meeting of the legal voters of the party here, selected MARTIN STOWELL, for President, and the usual number of other officers. In a few days a notice of the organization and officers names were published in a Republican paper in the county. A few days more and Mr. Daily comes home, and finding the turn affairs had taken, seemed dreadfully alarmed at the election of Stowell as head of the Republicans of Peru, and evidently regards it as a serious wrong against him; and of so much importance that a meeting is called and special efforts made to get certain of Daily's friends from different parts of the county (even twelve miles distant) to attend; thereby clearly showing Daily's fear of the Republicans of Peru, where Daily and Stowell both live and are best known. Still tearing the result, Daily's friends are cautioned not to let Stowell or his friends know the object of the meeting, only stating that Daily would speak. On the evening appointed, Daily's friends could be seen coming into the town about dark with anxiety depicted in their countenances. We have the following from an eye-witness:

The meeting was organized by electing a chairman, but no Secretary. Mr. Daily made a speech on political topics, such as might naturally be expected. On taking his seat, he called on Parson Wells, the Sheriff, (who is said to have been silenced by his church brethren for making too free with strong man's) for a speech. The Parson, after a few remarks, attempted to read a preamble and a resolution or two, but after making several attempts, Daily comes to the rescue and proposes to read them for him—he having written them. They set forth that one Martin M. Stowell, had opposed the election of the said Daily for Congress last year, and hence was not a true friend of the Republican party, and his elevation to the office of President of the Republican Club was a reflection on him, &c., that he ought to be read out of the party, which sustained him. (Daily). After reading the resolutions, Mr. Stowell stepped confidently to the floor in front of the "Chairman's" desk, and throwing the balance of the resolutions down on the desk, commenced speaking. Every eye and ear was open to catch every word, look, and gesture. He first clearly stated that this attack on him by Daily was entirely unexpected and uncalled for; that he was satisfied last year with having informed the Republicans of the Territory who had what Daily was; and that he believed he had done his duty both to the Republican party and the Territory. That he had decided not to oppose Daily this year, except in Convention. If he saw fit, the ground of his opposition to Daily last

year was that he had sacrificed one of the fundamental principles of the party by virtually swindling him and his friends out of the right to express their wishes for delegates to the Bellevue Convention which selected Daily; his other objections were well known. If said Daily or any other man wished to play Border Ruffian tricks on him, he would have a hard row to hoe; that he (Stowell) had devoted a year, and several hundred dollars, to secure to the people of Kansas the right to a just and fair use of the ballot-box, and with success; and he could see no difference between being swindled out of his vote by Border Ruffians in Kansas, or Border Ruffians in the sheep's clothing of Republicanism in Nebraska, except that the latter were much the meaner. That he believed Daily would shatter the Republican party into a thousand pieces if he thought it for his own personal benefit, &c.

After Stowell closed, Daily took the floor and attempted to continue his remarks, that Stowell had been brought by the Democrats—that he was a showed Democrat in disguise, (mark the logic of the two sentences) seeking to get control of the Republican party, and would then lead them where he pleased. (This is rather a poor opinion to express of those who supported him so faithfully last year.) That Stowell received pay for his services from Democrats, &c.

When Daily closed, Stowell again stepped to the floor and commenced to speak; when Daily, seeming to be afraid, tried to stop him; but Stowell appeared to pay but little attention to Daily or the Chairman, who also tried to choke him off. Stowell went on until Daily, standing on the floor near Stowell, called him to order. Stowell being too much of a gentleman not to conform to all just rules, stopped for Daily to state his point of order.

Mr. Daily said it was parliamentary when both sides had been heard, and the hour so late (his country friends looking confidence in him and clamoring to go home) to take the question, and demanded that the question be now taken.

The Chairman arose to take the question; but Stowell was too much for them both. He replied that having opened the question he had a right to close, and having the floor should yield for nothing but an adjournment.

Mr. Daily then asked "How long do you intend to speak?"

Stowell—"As long as I please."

Daily—"How long will it take you to get through?"

Stowell—"I will get done."

Daily—"But at this rate you may talk all night."

Stowell—"If you are tired of it you are so soon. You have your friends here and are trying to prevent my replying to your charges; but I have the floor and shall keep it as long as I please."

Daily here gave it up, sneaked off into a corner and listened for a half hour or more, while Stowell made everything ring to the infinite satisfaction of his friends. The effort made to crush him aroused his energies, and he seemed to disappoint every one by his bold, manly replies and cutting truths. When replying to Daily's charge that he had been bought by the Democrats, though failing to produce one particle of evidence, sneeringly stating

that Stowell had no money of his own—Stowell turning and pointing his finger at Daily, replied that he should have had money if Daily had not swindled him out of half he brought to this country. While finishing the sentence Stowell turned to the audience on the other side of the house, Daily seeing his eyes turned, sprung over the seat at him, with eyes and countenance flashing and with clenched fist, struck at Stowell without his knowing it, or suspecting that any one contemplated such a thing; but Stowell's friends caught Daily too soon, and the blow only touched him, having expended its force before reaching him. In a moment Stowell said: "Please be seated gentlemen, be seated." After a moment all took their seats, and Stowell proceeded as though nothing had happened, only saying that he was no build-up, and hence did not wish to engage in such scenes. That if such were the best arguments Daily had to work with, his case must be desperate. He knew who his friends were and feared nothing. That if Daily expected to secure friends in this way he thought for one (Stowell) had no cause to complain. He then proceeded for about half an hour in a good cutting strain directed at Daily and one or two of his friends, who are winking at Stowell's heels like so many little curs. Every point Daily stated was clearly and fairly answered.

It is understood that a report will be made out by Daily to suit himself. I understand all personal matters between Daily and Stowell were amicably settled last year, and hence whatever might have been said last year as an offset to Daily's course, that course does not now concern us. Had Stowell have dreamed that Daily was contemplating an attack upon him, and that the meeting was called for that purpose, he would have made some effort to get more of his friends there.

When the vote was taken, to the surprise of Daily and his friends, and half of the audience sustained him, and he was called upon all two or three times to vote. The feeling is quite unanimous that Daily showed his—sakefulness, and injured himself, and that feeling is gaining ground every day. Sympathy is fast turning in favor of Stowell, whose gentlemanly and manly course has secured for him the confidence and respect of many who knew little of him before. Many Republicans, and among them Daily's friends, consider his attack on Stowell uncalled for and wrong, and don't hesitate to pronounce it foolish in him to open the wound, which but for Daily's have been healed. Some are glad, for it is well understood that Daily is not the first choice of the Republicans here.

The cause for the attack is supposed to have been that Stowell had been representing the county to some extent, and found that four out of five of the Republicans prefer H. W. Tipton, of Bentonville, for Congress. Many look upon Daily's efforts to secure appropriations as designed more to secure the votes at Plattsmouth of the country interested, than the good of the Territory.

Daily has evidently caught a Tartar this time. We understand Stowell takes infinite satisfaction in singling—  
 (1) to prove how great a deacon  
 (2) Daily is constituted to be.  
 Let thy goodness like a fever,  
 Bid my wandering heart to thee."

Martin Stowell called his anti-Daily broadsheet of July 14, 1860, an extra to the Peru Times.

made my heart sad to think it necessary. It reminded me of a similar scene I once witnessed in a Spanish colony, and which made me curse the aristocratic authors from the bottom of my heart.

Our men are rather crowded for cooking facilities on board, and will be

willing to leave on reaching St. Louis; otherwise we get along very well. We have all our horses, men, and baggage on board, beside[s] the usual travel[ers].

The noble action of Fremont's guard is all the talk in military circles just now; and a feeling of indignation is felt

for the miserable attempt on the part of traitors in disguise, who are raising such a cry against Fremont and McClellan – evidently more to destroy confidence in them and weaken our efforts to crush out the traitors.<sup>23</sup> Let every true lover of his country, and hater of the secession aristocracy, frown upon all such attempts. Let the base subterfuge meet the contempt it deserves. In haste yours, M. Stowell. P. S. If there are eight or ten good men in Nemaha, who wish to join us, tell them to come to St. Louis, and I will find them a place. We have six or eight we propose to transfer to company D, for the purpose of enabling that company to get filled up.

*The Nebraska Battalion reached St. Louis October 30. The ensuing weeks were spent in drill. Fresh troops continued to arrive by the thousands, and disease and accidents began to take their toll of the men in the crowded encampment. Despite the boredom of camp life, Stowell saw the Curtis Horse becoming an effective fighting force.*

Benton Barracks, near St. Louis, Mo.,  
January 15, 1862

Mr. Furnas, Dear Sir, It has been a long time since I wrote you a line – in fact I have written but one business letter since I wrote you, aside from matters connected with the regiment.

The "Nebraska Cavalry" has been absorbed into the "Curtis Horse," which now comprises twelve companies and contains, officers and men, about 1,000. It is fast getting in readiness for action.

Much of the careless, reckless way of doing business is being dried up, and I hope to see an efficient regiment if we are not disbanded. Government seems to have too much cavalry in the field. Troops are pushing forward and all are wishing it was their time to go.

The health of our men, as a general thing, compares favorably with other companies. I am sorry to record the death of one of our Peru men, Henry Duel. He died in one of the St. Louis

hospitals day before yesterday. You would hardly believe me, I presume, when I say I deeply feel his loss. He was young and promising, good dispositioned, honest and faithful in the discharge of his duties, and deserving of my sincere respect.<sup>24</sup>

Another excellent young man, by the name of John McMichael, from Page County, Iowa, died two or three days before in one of the hospitals. He occupied the same tent with me when taken sick. My attachment was none the less for him than for the other. Indeed he was a fine young man, and having been with me so much – eaten, drank, and slept with me – I can truthfully testify to his self-sacrificing patriotism and public and private worth. Ever cheerful, he commanded the respect of his comrades and fellow soldiers. There are one or two from Nemaha County who are sick, but I hope they may be better soon.

I should write often, but I can hardly get time to write to my family. I have not rode my horse three hours for the past two weeks, solely from the great press of business. I do not complain, am glad I can do something to some purpose.<sup>25</sup>

It is generally conceded that I am doing the duties of three men and officers, but I hope for a change soon. Col. [William W.] Lowe (our colonel) is one of those hard-working, unassuming men; honest, competent, and faithful. He has the confidence of all who know him in the regiment. He commands with quiet dignity, and cannot fail to secure the love of his officers and men if he pursued the course he seems to have marked out for himself. You know I am no flatterer and hence will believe me when I say I speak my honest sentiments, without fear or hope of reward. If he gets through relying mainly on his own sense of justice, he will be heartily supported by every true man in the regiment.

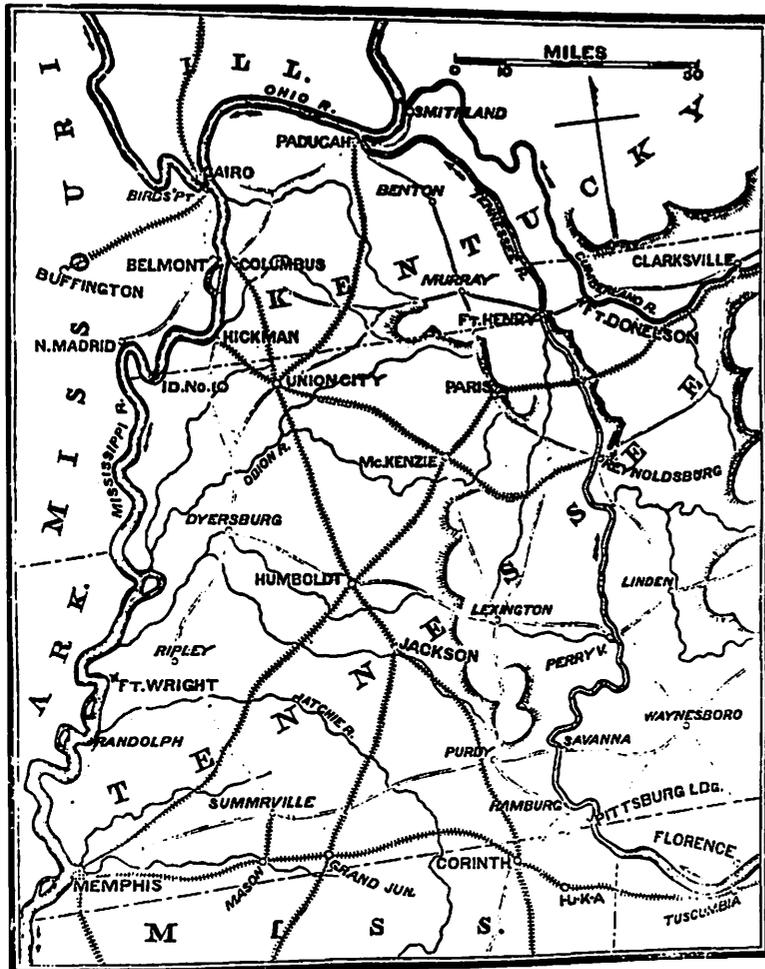
We all feel deeply mortified at the reports of jayhawking in Nebraska, and we hope those who have been so ready to condemn others in times past

will prove their own honesty by uniting with their neighbors to suppress it. I cannot see how any man, who can see the dreadful results which must come to our territory from such business, can lend the least sanction to such a practice. I do not hesitate to say that no man will allow himself to keep such men or their horses or other property about him unless he is willing to be branded as a thief himself. Let the county officers, if the legislature has made no provision, use every means in their power to suppress it; and let the people sustain them, with their lives and property if need be. A community controlled by bands of lawless, roving men, unchecked for months, step by step the virtuous become weakened; laws are trampled on, and the foundations of society are broken up. Years may elapse before security of peace or property can again be restored. My hope for the future is in Nebraska, and hence I feel deeply any stain upon her fair name.

There are many things here which do not suit me, but as it all is in a common cause, I forbear now. I have received several copies of the Advertiser, which was forwarded as requested. With best wishes for my adopted Territory, I am truly yours. M. Stowell.

*Early in February 1862 Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant launched his joint army-navy expedition against the Confederate defenses at Fort Henry on the Tennessee River and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland in northwestern Tennessee. Called the "key to the Confederate heartland" by historian Benjamin F. Cooling, the capture of these forts by the Union forces would open an invasion route to Nashville and the deep South.*

*Grant mobilized troops from throughout the Departments of Missouri and Ohio, including the First Nebraska Infantry from its winter camp near Georgetown, Missouri, and the Curtis Horse from St. Louis. A massive flotilla carried the men of Grant's expe-*



Western Tennessee, 1862.

dition southward, accompanied by the gunboats of Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote.

Although Fort Henry fell easily to naval bombardment on February 6, 1862, Fort Donelson held out for three days against combined army and navy assaults. The First Nebraska Infantry played a key role on the third and decisive day of battle before Fort Donelson February 15. The Curtis Horse was part of the force left to occupy Fort Henry and protect the Union rear.<sup>26</sup>

Steamer *Hannibal*, Cairo [Ill.]. Feb. 10, 1862.

Friend Furnas: We reached this place early this morning. Our regiment is on three boats. One boat has already gone to Fort Henry and the other two will leave in a few moments. The Nebraska Infantry . . . on the cars from St. Louis is here. They are to follow us immediately to Ft. Henry . . .

Ft. Henry, Tenn., Feb. 12 [1862],

R. W. Furnas, My dear sir: I am really in "Dixie" and I realize it in full. This is a beautiful spring-like day, warm and delightful. The trees are not in bloom, neither do I hear the robbin sing, but all seems cheerful and happy.

About 20,000 troops are said to have

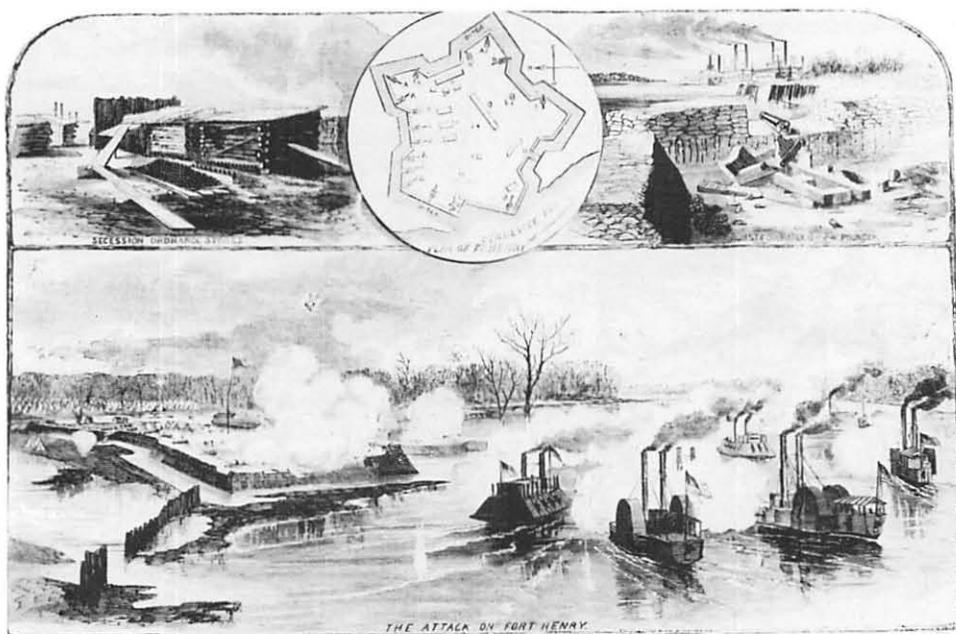
left here since last sundown for Ft. Donelson 12 miles east of this. It is believed there are 20 or 30,000 more here. All are anxious to go. The Nebraska infantry came here last night on a boat, but were ordered to go around by the [Cumberland] river to Ft. Donelson, and are probably nearly there before this.

We were all surprised at the extent of the entrenchments here. They extend nearly all around for a mile in all directions from the fort. The scene in and out of the fort is worth a respectable pilgrimage to see.

Five o'clock p.m. — The quartermaster [probably John N. H. Patrick of Omaha] and myself took a ride around the intrenchments and among the "cities of tents," which are in every direction from the fort on this side the river. Among objects of interest at the fort, which is only a breast work of earth, with trenches all around, angles, corners and triangles, magazines, log cabins, cannons — some mounted, one rifled all burst in pieces, shot, shell, grape, canister, and etc. A flag-staff, having had a cannon ball shot through it at the cross-trees, stood leaning over, nearly ready to fall; while through the surrounding woods are found enough shot and shell, round and conical, on the earth, and some buried as they struck, making, in some instances, holes large enough to bury a man. Some burst, and the fragments are scattered in every direction, leaving evidences on the trees of their belligerent propensities.

Feb. 14 — About half our men have gone over to Ft. Donelson, and in all directions to intercept any secesh troops who may attempt to escape. The balance of us are loading boats with provisions found here after the capture. They are being sent around by the river to Fort Donelson, for our troops. We are ready to jump into our saddles to go to the rescue, or join the chase, as circumstances require.

10 a.m. — Cannon are heard in the direction of the Cumberland and we are all waiting to mount and join in the



Harper's Weekly, March 1, 1862.

fight, if we can get a chance, which seems to be all that is feared.

Feb. 14 – The troops have been fighting at Ft. Donelson since I wrote the above. We have heard the cannon distinctly for most of the day. From 10 to 2 they roared to kill. Other cannon left here for Fort Donelson today, also two regiments of infantry.<sup>27</sup>

There were four or five companies of Secesh cavalry threatening the camp yesterday on this side of the river; and we were sent to engage them, but have just got here and are laying on a steamboat at the landing, about three miles above Ft. Henry on the Kentucky side of the river. It being late, we shall not go on shore until morning, and may then return or not, as circumstances demand. This is a brisk place. All are on the move. You will have some idea of the fortifications here – Ft. Henry – when I tell you that the entrenchments and breastworks are seven miles in extent.

The contest at Ft. Donelson is a severe one, and we are now in doubt as to the result if there is any result at all. All seem to feel confident of the success

of our troops, but expect we shall sustain considerable loss. Our men are fighting with a coolness and courage which is gaining them many laurels. Our own regiment feels provoked to think it has no chance to join in the engagement. But they are beginning to believe they will yet have a chance somewhere.

The battle at Ft. Donelson is believed to be the most bloody and hardest contested since the war commenced. You will probably have all the particulars before long. Stowell.

Ft's, Henry and Heiman, Ten., and Ky. February 21st, 1862.

Friend Furnas: You are doubtless aware of the surrender of Ft. Donelson before this, and most of the matters of interest attending it. Unfortunately – for so we regard it – our cavalry were not engaged in its capture, though our Nebraska Battalion were on the west side of the Tennessee River, threatened by all the force at Columbus, Memphis, and all the region between us. 1200 secesh cavalry were but a few miles from us, and an attack at any

time would not have surprised us at all. The day before we came over, 60 of our men engaged 400, which met accidentally and routed them. I was not a little surprised as day after day wore away in the capture of Fort Donelson and no attack was made on us, either to retake this point, or to draw off some of the forces at Ft. Donelson, and by that means aid their forces, which were so heroically maintaining their ground, but we looked in vain. Our men were continually on the scout, and a part of them are several miles in the country all the time watching the movements of the enemy. Since the battle, several regiments have returned to this point, also a battery of cannon (6 pieces). Several of our Nemahaians from the 1st Nebraska, now over the river at Ft. Henry, came over to see us today. They were in the thickest of the fight at Ft. Donelson, and are admitted by all to have acquitted themselves nobly during the seige, losing but 4 in killed, 2 of whom are understood to have been shot accidentally by some of our own forces.<sup>28</sup> The number of prisoners are believed today to have been in all about 22,000.

The reports from other points are favorable, and there seems to be a belief on the part of many that we are nearer the end than some suppose. Which ever way it may be, secesh has received a dreadful blow. The provisions and other stores & c., captured at Ft. Henry and Donelson will aid our commissary department at these points materially . . .

I am credibly informed that the Nebraska regiment met the Texan Rangers and killed 65 of them; that after the surrender they threw their arms into the river, declaring they should never fall into the hands of the Yankees. Their flag is now floating a few rods from my tent, under the stars and stripes. It is a fine banner, the accompanying cut may give you some idea of it [Here appears a drawing]. Blue ground work for stars, one large star in the centre and two smaller on each of the five points, a scroll in the

body of the flag and "Texas" printed and a star below. It is a splendid design, and its deep red and blue gave it a fine appearance. I certainly admire their courage and wish it might have been engaged in a better cause . . . .<sup>29</sup>

Forts Henry and Hunter [Heiman?], Tenn. and Ky., February 24, 1862.

The thousand reports which are coming to us of surrenders, vacations, & c., on the part of the Confederates and fighting until the last man has fallen before peace shall again be restored, are enough to create a smile, when we find tens of thousands of men well armed and equipped, provisioned, & c., yielding, as at Ft. Donelson. I think they are beginning to realize the feeble hold they have upon the masses, without whom the chivalry can do nothing. The fact is now beginning to be realized that the laboring classes, the "mudsills," constitute the real power of the country, and that the traitor hold on them is too feeble to enable them to cope with men who realize the fact that the good institutions, the happy homes with peace and plenty, depend upon their own right arms. Men accustomed to work for themselves are best suited to *fight for themselves*, and will be found lying in the entrenchments or upon the field, rather than abandon the benefits of the past and prospects of the future, by surrender. Well may the people rejoice at the noble stand made by our troops. The only complaints I have heard has been among those stationed away from the immediate scene of action, though doing important duty. All were needed, and from the best information I can gather, more were needed where they were during the engagement. While our infantry were in the hottest of the fight, our cavalry were watching the movements of the enemy in the surrounding country, carrying messages & c., to our stupendous whole.

You have doubtless heard of the movements east of here—at Clarksville, Bowling Green, and Nashville. In the neighborhood west of here, for thirty

miles, the secesh are packing up and leaving. Contrabands arrive here every day, and with other sources of information, we are kept fully posted.<sup>30</sup>

There has been 300 secesh cavalry about 20 miles from here, which have kept our men in a rage for some days. Not that they annoy us; but our men remind me of a noble horse, fully equipped and impatient to be let go. They only wish the commander-in-chief would say the word, and any number from 30 to 200 would give them a trial of their steel. Others are anxious to cut off communications between Columbus and Memphis by railroad, and would delight in undertaking the expedition. Two of our men stationed as pickets on a road towards a secesh town one day, rode leisurely on to town alone, stopped a while, tried to get the news, and after proving themselves Yankees by their numerous questions, rode leisurely back to camp, the party having returned before dark.

Many seem almost afraid the war is nearly "done gone," and they will have to return without seeing the elephant, while the larger portion cannot "see where we are going to land." What my own opinions are may seem visionary to some, and I will not trouble you with them; suffice it to say, "the end is not yet." When I told the people of our own county what to expect, a year and a half prior to open hostilities, they thought me excited or visionary, but are now satisfied that I did not tell enough.

February 25—We have just received word that our battalion, which embraces all our Nebraska men, have just been permanently attached to Thayer's command.<sup>31</sup> This is received by most of us with joy. We expect Thayer's brigade over to join us immediately, and shall then hope for a forward movement . . . .

We have good boating; the rains keep the Tennessee River full. M. S.

*Grant sought to exploit the victory at Fort Donelson by moving south along the Tennessee River. Most of the troops*

*again were loaded aboard steamboats for the campaign that resulted in the bloody Battle of Shiloh, April 6-7, 1862. Meanwhile, cavalry units, including the Curtis Horse, remained near Forts Henry and Donelson guarding against Confederate cavalry and bands of marauding guerrillas.*

Ft. Heiman, Ky, & Tenn., March 8, 1862

Friend Furnas: There are thought to be between thirty and forty steamers already in this vicinity, loaded, loading, and to be loaded. Some have gone up the river, (Tenn.), how far I do not know, but suppose to be about two miles above, waiting for others. Here you can see from the bluffs, ten or fifteen, said to be taking on troops from Ft. Donelson, while there are now here, and at Fort Henry, 12 or 15 more, and others coming up, arriving constantly. This is destined to be a great expedition, judging from present appearances.

Our battalion, and a battery of cannon are left here. The 52d Ind. Regiment, Indiana is expected to arrive here from Ft. Henry shortly. You don't know how anxious our regiment are to go. The Nebraska Regiment embarked day before yesterday, and is lost to us among the forest of boats. Our pickets are out night and day, there being no other guard here. A few citizens were in yesterday, there being no pickets on through the day. They pick up old boots, socks, clothes, & c., which our troops threw away when they left for the steamers. We do not seem to be attached to the Nebraska infantry as was supposed. It seems Gen. [Lew] Wallace changed his mind in regard to it.

March 9, 5 p.m. The battery referred to has just left here for Paris Landing, a few miles above here. One hundred of our men went as a guard with it. There seems to be no end to boats going up the river loaded with troops. We have just heard that the Confederates have withdrawn from the river 10 or 12 miles and are preparing for a great battle soon to take place this

side of Florence, Ala.

Citizens have been coming into camp all day for protection. They say that the confederates are pressing every fourth man into the service and they come here to prevent being forced to fight us. They are moving everything of any service to them to their aid. We have now here less than 200 men able for defence, and two companies of infantry only as yet, and from present appearance may not have any more. The citizens inform us that there are from fifteen hundred to two thousand confederate cavalry at Paris, 25 miles west of here. Whether they will turn their attention this way or some other is unknown. We have a large picket guard out and intend to be as well prepared as possible for any emergency, though it seems to me we are not a temptation to any confederate commander of decent sense. Though Fort Henry is but one mile and a half from here, it could be of no benefit to us for sometime on account of the river, and lack of any boats to reach us.

Mch. 10 – I was just told by one of the surgeons of an Ind. Regt. that there are not less than 120,000 troops on the boats just above here, about starting for Alabama. S.

*On March 20, 1862, the following note appeared in the Nebraska Advertiser:*

We very much fear that the above is the last letter our readers will peruse from our valuable correspondent, 'S,' who has been so faithful in keeping us posted with detailed news from the Nebraska boys. In our telegraphic columns will be found a telegraphic date Ft. Henry, March 12, four days later than the above letter, in which Maj. Stowell is mentioned in the list of killed at the battle at Paris. If it should prove that the person is Martin Stowell from this county, we will warrant he fell when the fight was thickest. No more brave or patriotic man ever breathed the breath of life. We shall probably hear more definitely by our next issue, and if it prove true that Mr. S. is killed, we will say more of him. – Ed.

*Nebraska Advertiser*, March 27, 1862.  
DEATH OF MARTIN STOWELL

A correspondent of the *St. Louis Democrat*, writing from Ft. Henry under date of March 16, confirms the reported death of Martin Stowell of this country. He says, speaking of the battle at Paris, 'We lost six men [sic] – Sergeant Major Martin Stowell, Sergeant D. H. Geary, privates P. M. McGuire, J. J. Warren, and Dickison.'<sup>32</sup>

The same correspondent adds: 'No better or braver soldiers can be found in the army than those from Nebraska. They are men that have been inured to trial and danger on the plains, and who have suffered all the fatigues and privations incident to western life.'

Martin Stowell was a native of Warren, Mass; where his wife and two children are now sojourning. He has resided at Peru in this county for four or five years past. He had some social characteristics which made him bitter enemies. Yet all admitted him to have rather a superior mind, bold, fearless, and unflinching in his course and advocacy of any measure he espoused. He was strictly temperate, and an industrious, hard working man, whose loyalty and bravery were the most zealous and daring. We will guarantee that Martin Stowell fell with his face to the enemy and where the battle raged fiercest. His bereaved family have the sympathies of this community.

#### EPILOGUE

*Clarence H. Gibbons, Stowell's fellow soldier from Nemaha County, described how Stowell died in a letter to his widow, Eliza Stowell:*

Fort Heiman, Ky., March 12, 1862

Mrs. Martin Stowell: As I am well acquainted with your husband and enlisted at Peru with him, we enjoyed our social conversations together until yesterday the 11th day of March, 1862.

As our country has a great many men in arms for the purpose to protect its constitution and laws we were called upon yesterday to put down drafting men in the Sesesh army. And after

traveling all day until about four o'clock we land[ed] in Paris, Henry County, Tennessee, and stormed the town. Finding no enemy in the town we went a half mile on the west side of town and found a camp of eight hundred strong. We opened fire on them with our battery and could not take much effect on them.

Then we made a charge and Martin Stowell being in the lead saw the enemy hid in the brush and he said, 'here they are boys,' and fired his pistol at them and in attempting to prepare for the second fire he was fired upon and instantly killed.

Your husband fought bravely and was very much esteemed in our regiment. We mourn his loss with you and may God grant that this government may have millions as true friends to their country as Martin was. I will see to the effects of your husband here and try to have it sent to Cairo until we return. Then [after this letter is?] received if you have any instructions to send me I will heartily attend to it as it was the wish of Martin for me seeing to his effects and letting you know about his death if I should survive and he did not.

We lost: nine killed, seven wounded, having in all three hundred men and six field pieces. The sesesh loss was one hundred and fifty killed and eighty wounded, having in all twelve hundred. Yours, Clarence H. Gibbons.

I wrote this as soon as I arrived from my journey and am very tired, excuse the carelessness in my writing, C. H. Gibbons.<sup>33</sup>

*The Union soldiers killed at Paris were buried nearby, and the bodies were moved later to a national cemetery at Memphis, Tennessee. The identity of the men was unknown by then, and they were buried in numbered, but unnamed, graves. At the time of the exhumation, one body supposedly wore the uniform of a sergeant major. This body was buried in grave 2432 in the national cemetery, which is likely the final resting place of Martin Stowell of Peru.<sup>34</sup>*

Stowell's service was not forgotten in his adopted hometown of Peru, Nebraska, as long as Civil War veterans survived. When Post 302 of the Grand Army of the Republic was organized in Peru it was named in Stowell's honor. Plans underway in 1928 to erect a monument to Stowell's memory were never realized.<sup>35</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Vol. X, Part I (Washington: GPO, 1884), 16-18. See also John S. Ezell, ed., "Excerpts from the Civil War Diary of Lieutenant Charles Alley, Company 'C', Fifth Iowa Cavalry," *Iowa Journal of History* 49 (July 1951): 255, for a soldier's view of the fight.

<sup>2</sup>Stowell's Massachusetts years are summarized in Leo Hauptmann, *Martin Stowell*, typescript biography, Peru State Teachers' College, 1928, revised in 1932. Copy at Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>3</sup>Hauptmann, *Martin Stowell*, 18.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Stowell to Eliza Stowell, Aug. 15, 1856, and Stowell to Thomas Higginson, Oct. 27, 1856, Thomas Higginson Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

<sup>5</sup>Stowell to Higginson, Oct. 27, 1856, Higginson Papers; *Nebraska Advertiser*, Brownville, Nebraska Territory, Oct. 6, 1859.

<sup>6</sup>*Nebraska Advertiser*, Oct. 27, 1859.

<sup>7</sup>Stowell to Higginson, Nov. 17, 19, 1856, Higginson Papers.

<sup>8</sup>Stowell to Thaddeus Hyatt, Nov. 23, 1860, Thaddeus Hyatt Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka; *Nebraska Advertiser*, July 26, 1860.

<sup>9</sup>For a review of Nebraska territorial politics during this period, see *Illustrated History of Nebraska* by J. Sterling Morton, succeeded by Albert Watkins, ed., Vol. I (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Company, 1911), 407-15, and James B. Potts, "North of 'Bleeding Kansas': The 1850s Political Crisis in Nebraska Territory," *Nebraska History* 73 (Fall 1992): 110-18. Stowell's candidacy was noticed in the *Nebraska Advertiser*, Sept. 29, 1859.

<sup>10</sup>*Nebraska Advertiser*, Oct. 6, 1859.

<sup>11</sup>*The Nebraska Herald*, Nemaha City, Nebraska Territory, July 19, 1860; *Peru Times Extra*, July 14, 1860; *Nebraska Advertiser*, July 26, 1860.

<sup>12</sup>Morton-Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, Vol. I, 425-53.

<sup>13</sup>*The Nebraska Herald*, Mar. 2, 1861.

<sup>14</sup>Military service record of Martin Stowell, copy at Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>15</sup>For a history of the Fifth Iowa Cavalry, see *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion*, IV, 1-9 Regiment of Cavalry (Des Moines: 1910), 845-61.

<sup>16</sup>The letters appear in the *Nebraska Advertiser*, Oct. 24, Nov. 7, 1861; Jan. 23, Feb. 20, 27, Mar. 6, 13, 20, 1862.

<sup>17</sup>The deceased man was Edward Chapman. The reason for the altercation is unclear from accounts in the *Council Bluffs Bugle*, but a coroner's inquest charged Kelsay with felonious assault. As Kelsay was from Omaha, the two men may have known one another. Stowell hints that the shooting resulted from a personal dispute. When Captain M. T. Patrick refused to turn Kelsay over to the civil authorities, the Council Bluffs press was outraged. See *Council Bluffs Bugle*, Oct. 16, 23, 30, 1861.

<sup>18</sup>The most efficient way for western troops to reach the Union base at St. Louis was to march across Iowa and sail down the Mississippi River, or travel via the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad, which crossed northern Missouri. The First Nebraska Infantry took the latter route in August 1861.

<sup>19</sup>Probably a reference to Company A commander Matthewson T. Patrick, whose company monopolized all the horses and whose conduct in the Kelsay shooting affair had offended some of the men. Charles Alley complained about Patrick in his diary and noted that the officer openly condoned foraging from civilians along the line of march. *Alley Diary*, 243.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas W. Tipton of Brownville was chaplain of the First Nebraska Infantry, and Silas Strickland of Bellevue was regimental adjutant. Evidently the two men were en route to join the First Nebraska, then located near Springfield, Missouri. Because of rebel activity in Missouri, virtually all military travel in Missouri was first routed through St. Louis.

<sup>21</sup>General Sterling Price commanded the Confederate Missouri State Guard. Benjamin McCulloch led Confederate troops who defeated a Union army under Nathaniel Lyon at the Battle of Wilson's Creek near Springfield, Missouri, Aug. 10, 1861.

<sup>22</sup>Colonel David Moore organized a force of Union Home Guards in northeastern Missouri and continually harassed secession forces commanded by General Martin Green of the Confederate Missouri State Guard. The engagement mentioned by Stowell probably was a small skirmish, typical of the constant guerrilla-style warfare that plagued Missouri. See Wiley Britton, *The Civil War on the Border*, I (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1899), 147. An excellent recent study is Michael Fellman, *Inside*

*War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>23</sup>John C. Fremont was Union commander in Missouri. During an Oct. 25 advance on Springfield, Fremont sent troops from his bodyguard under Major Charles Zagoni to reconnoiter the town. Zagoni's small force dispersed a few rebels and raised the American flag on the courthouse before withdrawing. Fremont was relieved of command in Missouri Nov. 2, 1861. Britton, *Civil War on the Border*, 154-55.

<sup>24</sup>Alley's diary provides additional details about the regiment's activities at Benton Barracks.

<sup>25</sup>Stowell had been promoted to Sergeant Major of the First Battalion, Curtis Horse, on Jan. 11, 1862.

<sup>26</sup>The best study of the Fort Henry-Fort Donelson campaign is Benjamin F. Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

<sup>27</sup>Stowell probably heard the cannon fire from the failed Feb. 14 gunboat attack on Fort Donelson.

<sup>28</sup>The First Nebraska Infantry was in the thick of the fighting at Fort Donelson on Feb. 15. At a crucial point in the battle, the Nebraskans helped turn back a desperate Confederate attempt to break out of their encircled fortifications. See Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson*, 166-99.

<sup>29</sup>Evidently the Texas flag captured by the First Nebraska Infantry had been brought over to Stowell's camp by some of his Nemaha County friends from that regiment.

<sup>30</sup>The Union victories at Forts Henry and Donelson had knocked a gaping hole in the Confederate defense line in the West. They were forced to abandon West Tennessee, and lost Nashville, its strategically important capital.

<sup>31</sup>John M. Thayer, former commander of the First Nebraska Infantry, had been promoted to lead a brigade in Lew Wallace's division.

<sup>32</sup>Official Union losses at Paris were given as five killed and five wounded. The *Roster of Nebraska Volunteers, 1861-1865*, compiled by Edgar S. Dudley from records in the Nebraska Adjutant General's office, lists three members of the Curtis Horse who were killed at Paris, three wounded, and one taken prisoner. Captain Robert Bullis of Buel's Missouri Battery, which accompanied the Curtis Horse to Paris, was also killed.

<sup>33</sup>Gibbons exaggerated the Confederate casualties at Paris, which were negligible. His letter is transcribed in Hauptmann, *Martin Stowell*, 64-65.

<sup>34</sup>Hauptmann, *Martin Stowell*, 65.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 73, gives the proposed wording for the monument.