

Notes on Major Robert Seldon Garnett, 1819-1861. By Olaf T. Hagen, Associate Research technician Region 4, National Park Service, San Francisco, Calif., June 15, 1939.

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Major Robert Seldon (sic) Garnett who was in command of Fort Simcoe during its construction, 1856-58, had previous and subsequent service in the Army where he sought his career. Less generally known than many contemporaries who served with the military on the Pacific Coast, he occupied a more responsible position in this region than others towards whom local tradition often points with mingled pride. Like many other sympathizers with the South he resigned from the Army and joined the Confederacy at the outbreak of the War of Secession and was among the first to fall in defense of the "Lost Cause." Being especially interested in him as the builder of Fort Simcoe other periods of his life are touched upon only in this sketch.

Robert Seldon Garnett was born at 'Champlain', Essex County, Virginia, December 16, 1819. After graduating from West Point in 1841 he served with the Fourth Artillery on the Canadian border and as assistant instructor in infantry tactics at the Military Academy^I. He was later (1845) aide de campe to General Wool, and during the Mexican War to General Taylor. Distinguishing himself in the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma he was successively breveted captain and major for gallant and meritorious conduct in the battles of Monterey and Buena Vista, respectively. After participating in the occupation of Texas he was again

1-Armistead, Gordon Churchill Jr. Dictionary of American Biography, Scribners New York, 1931) VII, 158.

Powell, William Henry, Comp. List of Officers of the United States Army from 1779 to 1900 (L.R. Hamersly and Company, New York, 1900, 325.

Appleton's Cyclopedia of American Biography (Appleton, New York, 1888), II, 607.

detailed to the military Academy, where he served as Commandant of the Corps of Cadets and instructor in Infantry Tactics. On ¹March, 27, 1855 he was commissioned major in the Ninth Infantry and was sent to command companies of that regiment in operation against Indians in the Military Department of the Pacific. ²Here he participated in the campaigns against the Puget Sound and Yakima Indians in 1856.

On May 19 Colonel Silas Casey, in command of military operations in the Puget Sound region had reported that as far as the Indians west of the Cascade Mountains were concerned ²"the contest is about ended." Major Garnett with two companies of the Ninth Infantry was therefore ordered to proceed by way of the Cowlitz and the Columbia Rivers to join Colonel Wright who was in command of the regular troops sent against the Indians east of the Cascades ⁴. On July 18 Wright had declared the war at an end, being satisfied that the Indians were convinced of the folly of continuing hostilities. ⁵He was therefore free to continue explorations with a view of determining the most eligible site for a military post as contemplated by Major Wool's conciliatory policy towards the Indians. Although ⁵somewhat at loss to fix upon a position for

2--Before coming to the Pacific Coast in 1855 Major Garnett had been commissioned 2nd Lieut. 4th Artl by brevet, July 1, 1841; 2nd lieut Jan 31, 1842; 1st lieut. Aug 18, 1846; Cap. by brevet, Sept. 23, 1846; for gallant conduct at Monterey; Major by brevet Feb. 23, 1847 for gallant and meritorious conduct at Buena Vista; transferred to 7th Inf. Aug 31, 1848 Capt. March 8, 1851; transferred to 1st dragoons Mar. 3, 1855; Major 9th Inf. Mar. 27, 1855.

3--Wool to Asst. Adj't. Gen'l U.S.A. Lt. Col. L. Thomas, June 3, 1856, in 34th Cong. 3 Sess. H. Ex. Doc. 86 (ser. 906), 163.

4--Ibid--The use of this longer route, instead of the more direct one over the Naches Pass has been pointed out by Wool's critics.

Stevens, Hazard, the Life of Isaac Ingalls Stevens (2 vols. Houghton Mifflin and Company, Boston and New York, 1900) 11, 195.

5--Wright to W.W. Mackall, A.A.G. Dept. of Pacific July 18, 1856. MS in Records of War Dept., Adj't. Gen'l's office. Dept. of Pacific in National Archives. Hereafter referred to as AGO, National Archives.

permanent military post" ^{having} after ~~adding~~ examined the country "pretty thoroughly" a point on the southern boundary of the Simcoe Valley was found to have important advantages. ⁶ On August 3 Wright had concluded that his position on the Toppnish Creek was the "most desirable one for a station for the winter." ⁷

Major ⁸ Garnett to whom was entrusted the task of building the post which was designated Fort Simcoe, arrived in the Simcoe Valley early in August with Companies "G" and "F" of the Ninth Infantry from the camp on the "Kittitas" where Colonel Wright had left him with three companies on July 21. ⁸ Work on the "temporary" buildings for the shelter of the troops was begun immediately and pushed vigorously, but before being, ~~overpopulated~~ overcrowded into these unfinished quarters the troops had been exposed in tents during the severest part of the winter. ⁹

The building of Fort Simcoe was no small task under the circumstances. The site selected was about sixty miles from the Dalles where was located the nearest military post from which supplies could be obtained. ¹⁰ Between Fort Dalles and Fort Simcoe communication was by pack trail, and work was at once begun on a wagon road which was passable to the Army's six mule wagons before the last of September. Since the route was impracticable for wagons for the five months of the year beginning Nov. 1, little besides provisions could be transported during the fall of 1856. For the building of the post therefore the troops were dependant on pine timber which was easily accessible. Consequently the first buildings were hewn pine logs

⁵ Ibid-Splawn, Andrew Jackson, Ka-mi-akin; The Last Hero of the Yakimas. (Kilham Stationary and Printing Company, Portland, Or., 1917), 63.

⁸-Splawn, Op. cit., 63.

⁹-Ibid; 36 Cong. , 1 Sess., Sen Ex Doc. 52 (ser. 1035), 264.

¹⁰-"right to Mackall, Aug. 17, 1856; same to same, May 15, 1857 AGO., National Archives.

A plan of Fort Simcoe prepared in the winter of 1856 or the spring of 1856 indicates that the log quarters erected during the first fall were to form a part of the permanent post. Except for the outlying block houses each building was so situated that it would form a part of a regular quadrangle around which the rest of the buildings were planned. In completing the post Major Garnett wanted to add to the comforts of the men whose life on the frontier were none too good at its best. For the accommodation of the officers frame quarters with such convenience as ~~the~~ thought practicable were contemplated. In completing these, however, he encountered obstacles more difficult than the elements. When the quartermaster's Department refused ~~to~~ reduced his requisitions for lime, firebrick and paint, he hastened "with some temper to relieve his official character from aspersions or implied censures."¹¹ "Without expectation of changing any action in the case," "Without expectation of changing any action in the case," but to protect himself against the supposition that ~~he~~ by silence he had admitted the force or soundness of the reasons given for not granting the requisition, he explained at length the proposed use of the materials requested.¹² Garnett finally appealed over the heads of officials in charge of the department of the Pacific and requested the "Secretary of War that he...cause instructions to be conveyed through the proper departments to the Deputy Quartermaster, serving in the Department of the Pacific, to have this post supplied with a sufficiency of common paint to paint the quarters here necessary for the shelter and occupancy of the Officers of this command."¹³

11-Garnett to Mackall, July 16, 1857. AGO., National Archives.

12-Same to same, Aug. 18, 1857, Garnett to Lt. Col. Thos. Swards, Deputy Quartermaster General, San Francisco, Calif. Aug 14, 1857. AGO., National Archives.

13-Garnett to Col. S. Cooper, Adj't. Gen'l U.S.A. Washington D.C. Nov. 4, 1857. AGO National Archives.

He regretted bothering the Secretary about such a petty detail, but felt compelled to do so, having been refused paint and been ordered to use white wash which, having been refused a sufficiency of lime for plastering, would have to be applied to wood and as such "is known to be unfit for the habitations of persons who desire to preserve those habits of neatness and cleanliness common among the class of people in civil life from whom the Officers of our Army are supposed to come." Claiming credit for himself for having exercised the greatest care and economy in expenditure of public funds and challenging the closest examination on this score, he added that he considered it equally his duty "to see that the small portion of the Army entrusted to my care and command be provided for ~~at all times~~ in a manner becoming our government and people."

"The life of our army on the frontier is sufficiently uninviting under the most favorable circumstances and I cannot be made to believe that on the plea of a small economy, the Honorable Secretary of War, the government ~~and~~ of our people, desire to add to its inconveniences and privations by condemning it to live in habitations scarcely better finished than the negro quarters of the more humane and respectable portion of Louisiana sugar plantations."

Delay in constructing the buildings which were not completed until the spring of 1858¹⁴ was attributed to the failure of the Quartermaster Department in supplying funds and materials requisitioned. To their illiberable spirit in interpreting the regulations would also have to be charged the inhospitality of the post in not providing quarters to visiting officials whose duties brought them "unhappily... to this distant region, wrote Garnett.¹⁵

14-36 Cong. 1 Sess. Sen Ex Doc. 52 (ser. 1036), 264.

15-Garnett to Swords, Aug. 14, 1857. AGO National Archives.

Despite the fact that the Fort Simcoe buildings were completed on a scale less ambitious than Garnett had wished them they were well planned. Both in construction and design they were superior to buildings ordinarily found on a military post of this type. Officers of the Indian Service, to whom the post was transferred in 1859, reported some of them "elegant structures."¹⁶ of "superior construction," affording "comforts" and conveniences seldom found in Indian country."¹⁷ From the four officers' quarters still standing it is evident that Major Garnett was successful in erecting beautiful and substantial buildings in spite of the adverse conditions he faced. Even if the parsimonious policy of the Quartermaster's Department has been justified by the abandonment of the post by the military in 1859 it was intended as a permanent station when its construction was carried on by Garnett and his efforts to make the post attractive and lasting seem warranted.

Major Garnett appears to have been one of the staunchest supporters of Wool's policy whereby Fort Simcoe was to serve not "for the immediate protection of the whites but to keep the Indians in awe," and to learn their feelings "and to check and change these when they became inimical,"¹⁸ Pursuing this policy which had been inaugurated in the region by Colonel Wright's peace negotiations in the spring of 1856, Garnett refused to turn over to civil authorities Indians accused of participating in the murders that had led to the war. He insisted that in view of Wright's understanding with them such action might precipitate a war from which little was to be gained. He suggested that the same ends could be accomplished by banishing the leaders of the hostiles from their favorite haunts and

 16-Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1859, 36 Cong. 1 Sess H Ex Doc. 188 (ser. 1023) 187

17-Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1860, p. 179

18-MacRae, 1853-1856, Jan 1, 1857, in 34 Cong. 3 sess. H Ex. Doc. 76

leaving their punishment to the Indians themselves in accordance with
 polices said to have been pursued by the Hudson's Bay Company. ¹⁹ was
 warforced by overt acts of violence on the part of the Indians, when
 the Army should be prepared to act promptly and vigorously.

Indian depredations and attacks on Colonel Steptoe's command and on
 miners early in 1858 caused a renewal of hostilities. Garnett, who had but
 recently seen Fort Simcoe completed ~~was~~ entered upon the
 campaign enthusiastically. While principal campaign was to be under
 Colonel Wright operating from Fort Walla Walla Major Garnett was directed
 to proceed against the Indians north and west of the Columbia. His advice
 that a column as large as that proposed under Wright's command would have
 difficulty in engaging the Indians in combat does not appear to have been
 heeded. ²⁰ Nor does it appear that Colonel Wright or any of his superiors
 lent an ear to ~~Garnett's~~ Garnett's proposals about how the two columns might
 cooperate. ²¹

Preparations for the coming campaign gave Garnett an opportunity to
 repeat urgently his requisitions for shoes and flour not yet granted
 by the Quartermasters Department. ²² Finally on August 5th and 9th
 respectively, Post Orders No. 17 and 25 were issued covering instructions ²³
 for the majority of the contingencies that might arise in the march.
 On August 15, after the encounter of one detachment of his command with
 the Indians, Garnett found it his "painful duty" to report the death
 of Second Lieutenant Jess (sic) K. Allen, who had fallen at 2 o'clock that
 morning in a successful surprise attack upon an Indian camp.

 19-Garnett to Adj. Gen. & AAAG Fort Dalles, July 16, 1857.
 Garnett to W.W. Mackall, Aug. 15, 1857. Same to same Feb. 3, 1858.
 AGO National Archives.

20-Same to same, July 7, 1858 AGO National Archives.

21-Same to same, July 17 1858. AGO National Archives.

22-To Mackall, July 28, 1858 same to same, July 28, 1858. AGO Nat'l A.

23-To Major Mackall Aug 10, 1858. AGO National Archives.

in this "sad affair" reports of which caused him "to fear that he (Allen) was shot accidentally by one of his own men in the darkness of the hour." "21 men, about 50 women and children, 70 head of horses & 15 head of cattle besides considerable other Indian property were captured." 24 Three of the men being identified as participants in the attack on the miners were shot. A fourth was killed by the soldiers when he tried to escape.

From the Camp of the Yakima Expedition on the Wenatcha River Garnett reported on August 30 that five more Indians had been captured by a detachment under Lieutenants Crook, McKall and Turner. These were also shot 25. On September 23 when the expedition returned to Fort Simcoe after 45 days in the field, the main column had marched 505 miles, Garnett felt that the "successes on the Yakima and the Wenatcha though small have repaid us however for the labor. 26 In all ten Indians had been captured and shot. One officer, Lieutenant Allen was killed and a private "Liebe of Co. 'C' 9th Infy struggled behind the command and was found dead the next morning." 27. Before starting homeward on September 15 news of Colonel Wright's decisive victory in the Battle of Four Lakes had been received. 28 It so far surpassed any of the achievements of Garnett's expedition that after referring to the small successes mentioned that he probably found little comfort in writing:

"As predicted to you in my letter of the 27th of July the main body of the hostiles on this side of the Columbia took refuge in that vast region of country laying between the Blackfeet Indians and the Columbia." 29

--24--to Mackall, Aug. 15, 1858 AGO National Archives.

25--to Mackall Aug. 30, 1858, AGO, National Archives.

26--to Mackall, Sept. 24, 1858, AGO National Archives.

27--Ibid

28--Ibid

29 Ibid.

Any ~~disappointment~~ and dismay that might have been caused by Wright's more brilliant military achievements were not relieved by Garnett's personal affairs. On September 16 Captain H.M. Judah, ³⁰ Commanding Fort Simcoe during Garnett's absence, wrote dolefully,

"Supposing that Maj. G. was within 80 miles of the post and at the suggestion of Dr. Heger I dispatched an Indian express to him from the latter on Monday 13th announcing to him the probable fatal illness of Mrs. G.

"I am pained to add that although still alive Mrs. G. is only so through the operation of stimulants that Dr. has no hope of her recovery although there is always hope while life remains."

That this news hastened the return of Garnett's expedition does not seem probable. He had at first planned to be back at Fort Simcoe by September 20th but in a dispatch of Sept. 7 ³¹ indicated that pursuit of the Indians to the Colville River would postpone his return until September 30. The abandonment of the proposed visit to Fort Sim Colville was attributed to lack of supplies and shoes and the supposition that Wright having defeated the Indians would visit the region which was more properly in his field. ³² Since the homeward march was commenced on September 14, from a point so far away from Fort Simcoe that it required nine or ten days for the column that averaged seventeen mile a day to reach the latter place, it is not probable that Judah's messenger sent on the thirteenth reached Garnett before the return was started.

Information found about Major Garnett's personal affairs is too sketchy to permit conclusions. It is assumed, however, that Mrs. G

30-Judah to Major (Mackall) September 16, 1858 AGO National Archives.

Copy attached

31--Judah to Mackall, Sept. 16, 1858, Garnett to Judah, Sept. 7, 1858.
AGO National Archives.

32-Garnett to Mackall, Sept. 24, 1858, AGO, National Archives.

referred to in the quoted dispatch from Captain Judah was Mary Nielson (sic) of New York City, when Major Garnett had married "the previous year." ³³

Major Garnett's stay at Fort Simcoe after the return of the Yakima expedition was very brief. As late as October 13, 1858 letters dated Fort Simcoe were signed by him as commanding officer of the post, but on the first of November ³⁴ Captain J.J. Archer of the Ninth Infantry was commanding the post.

Leaving Fort Simcoe in the fall of 1858 ³⁵ Major Garnett went to Europe where he traveled on sick leave. At the beginning of the War between the States he returned to the United States and on April 30, 1861, ³⁶ resigned his commission in the United States Army. He was appointed Adjutant General with the rank of Colonel to organize the Virginia troops and on June 6 was commissioned Brigadier General in command of the forces in the western part of the state. ³⁷ Confronted by General McClellan, whose forces outnumbered him six to one, with part of his force surrounded, he saved his army by a "most masterly retreat," but was himself killed after the sharp engagement which occurred when Union Troops overtook, the rear guard with which he was covering the retreat, at Carrick's

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33-Armistead, D.A.B. VII, 159 It is not entirely clear what is meant by "the previous year" as used in this article which states that Garnett remained on duty until 1858 when he went to Europe on leave and that he had married the preceding year, but it was presumably 1857.

Dr. Hegar the post surgeon who stayed at Fort Simcoe during the Yakima Expedition's absence, in his 1858 report dated Fort Simcoe, February 1859 stated that illness occurred in the family of an officer that resulted in the death of the mother and child." in 36th Cong. 1 sess Sen. Ex. Doc. 52 (ser. 1035) 265.

334-Garnett to MacKall, Oct. 15, 1858, AG National Archives. Capt. J.J. Archer to Capt. A. Pleasanton A.A.A. Gen'l Dept. of Oregon Letters. Received Dept. of Oregon, Archives, San Francisco Presidio.

35-Armistead D.A.B. VIII 159 Appleton's Cyclopaedia, II, 607.

36-Powell, Op cit. 325.

37-Applenton's Cyclopaedia, II, 607.

Fort on the Cheat River on July 3, 1861.

Because of Major Garnett's opposition to the surrender of the Indians whom Governor Stevens insisted be turned over to the civil authorities for punishment it might be expected that he would have shared General Wool's unpopularity in the Territory. His support of the conciliatory policy toward the Indians seems to have been forgiven, however, because of his vigorous stand in war of 1858. He believed that in the attack on the miners in June, 1858, "the Indians had no just provocation,"³⁹ his admission that "the public sentiment of the country renders it necessary" ⁴⁰ that we should at once go through with some such expedition, as suggested by General Clarke, and his conduct of the Yakima Expedition redeemed him in the eyes of the citizens of the Territory. Local historians who have severely criticized Wool's actions have credited Major Garnett with "conspicuous gallantry" in the wars of 1856 and 1858 both east and west of the Cascade mountains. "While in this territory the then Major Garnett was one of the most popular and esteemed officers on duty in the Indian war,"⁴¹

36-Armistead D.A.B. VII 159; Appleton's Cyclopedia (II 607), says that his army was routed.

39 -Garnett to Mackall June 26, 1858 AGO National Archives.

40-Same to same, July 7, 1858. AGO National Archives.

41-~~Evans~~ Evans, Elwood, comp. History of the Pacific Northwest; Oregon and Washington 2 vols: (North Pacific History Publishing Company Portland Oregon 1889) 1,593, n.2

Among the sources that should have been consulted but not available to me in preparing this sketch should be mentioned J.M. Garnett Genealogy of the Mercer-Garnett Family (1910) edited by Armistead.