

CREATING CAMP DOUGLAS

UNITED STATES TROOPS ORDERED TO UTAH FROM California during the Civil War were intended to protect the overland trail from Indian depredations, but they instead made it their business to keep a sharp eye on Brigham Young and the Mormons. The founding of Fort Douglas in 1862 on the east bench of Salt Lake City by Colonel Patrick E. Connor and his California Volunteers was the last thing Young wanted, and the incident is riddled with ironies long forgotten in the century and more since.

For instance, when Shoshoni war parties had raided the overland mail route between the North Platte and Fort Bridger with relative impunity that

spring, and it had become apparent that President Abraham Lincoln would have to take action, Young wired Washington: "The militia of Utah are ready and able . . . to take care of all the Indians . . . and protect the mail line." It was Young's idea that his offer would be seen as a logical answer to the situation and no federal forces would be necessary—what with the Union husbanding its troops to face Southern armies. But Brigham Young was no longer governor of Utah and could not deal directly with the federal government. He had been replaced by Alfred Cumming, who, in turn, had resigned in 1861 to join the Confederacy.



Patrick Edward Connor. Utah State Historical Society.

John Dawson of Indiana was then appointed chief executive of the territory. He had barely settled in before becoming embroiled in a scandal that sent him packing just six weeks into his term. Next up was Stephen Harding, another Indianan, who arrived in July 1862 just as private citizen Young was wiring Abraham Lincoln his offer to provide militia. Lincoln was well aware of the church leader's power and influence. He understood that while Young had not been governor since 1857, the mantle of that office rested invisibly, but securely, on Brigham's shoulders. The Mormon people would listen only to him. And President Lincoln also knew that Young knew it.

Lincoln authorized him to raise, equip, and arm one company of cavalry for ninety days. Young acted within an hour of receiving his answer. The commander of the militia company was to be Lot Smith—the shrewd guerilla leader of the recent Utah War, that standoff between Brigadier General Albert Sidney Johnston's Utah Expedition and the Mormon Nauvoo Legion that resulted in the establishment of Camp Floyd west of Provo. (Camp Floyd, its name changed to Fort Crittenden because Secretary of War John B. Floyd had defected to the South, was by 1862 deactivated.) The irony in Lot Smith's appointment was its complete turnaround from the days



Camp Douglas, Utah Territory. Photo by C. W. Carter; LDS Church Archives.

when he raided and burned government supply wagons near Fort Bridger. Now he was charged with protecting U.S. property at all costs.

In the long run, Young's ploy failed, for feisty Patrick E. Connor was on the march for Great Salt Lake Valley and nothing would prevent it. There was a bit of a fuss that October as Connor's five companies of infantry and two troops of cavalry entered Fort Crittenden. That was where the citizens of Great Salt Lake City wanted the flinty Irishman to station his command, but Connor had no intention of being forty miles from civilization. There were rumors that the dread "Danites," the so-called Destroying Angels, would prevent Connor from crossing the Jordan River on the outskirts of the city, thus keeping the federal force at a distance.

The challenge—though nonexistent—suited Connor just fine. He had been looking for an excuse to justify marching his men more than seven hundred miles on outpost duty. The colonel let it be known he would cross over the Jordan "If hell yawned below him." He crossed the river that

afternoon without incident, and the following morning struck out due north for the city. But let T. B. H. Stenhouse, who was there, describe the scene: "On the 29th of October, 1862, with loaded rifles, fixed bayonets and shotted cannon, Colonel Connor march the Volunteers into Salt Lake City, and proceeded 'to the bench,' directly east of the city. There, at the base of the Wasatch Mountains, they planted the United States flag, and created Camp Douglas." In a footnote to his book, *The Rocky Mountain Saints*, Stenhouse remarked, "Connor could not possibly have selected a better situation for a military post, and certainly no place could have been chosen more offensive to Brigham. The artillery have a perfect and unobstructed range of Brigham's residence, and with their muzzles turned in that direction, the Prophet felt awfully annoyed."

Connor named the new camp after recently deceased "Little Giant" Stephen A. Douglas. The following January, Connor ordered his command into the field to punish Indians in the Bear River area near present Preston, Idaho. What ensued

was a massacre of Shoshonis with the toll numbering from 224 to 350, depending on the source. Connor lost 14 dead and scores wounded; he gained a promotion and a reputation as an Indian fighter.

It was after word later arrived at Camp Douglas that Connor had been promoted to brigadier general for his Bear River campaign that exuberant members of his regiment loaded the howitzers with powder and wadding and fired an

eleven-gun salute in his honor, rudely awakening Brigham Young. Although express riders were dispatched to rally available fighting men to protect their leader from what they perceived as an “unprovoked military bombardment,” the record is silent regarding Young’s comments on learning the true cause of the artillery barrage. Fort Douglas stands much as it did 135 years ago, mute testimony to Utah’s frontier heritage.