
Edward O. C. Ord on Frontier Defense

Transcribed, with Foreword and Notes,

By ROBERT W. JOHANSEN

FOREWORD. — Edward Otho Cresap Ord, a native of Maryland, was closely identified with California during his military career, and in 1868, as major general, he attained command of the Department of the Pacific.¹ Ord was graduated from West Point in the class of 1838. He was commissioned a second lieutenant in the 3rd U. S. artillery and saw almost immediate service in the campaigns against the Seminole Indians in Florida. In 1846, following the outbreak of the Mexican War, Ord's regiment was ordered to California. Although they did not arrive until January 1847, too late to participate in the conquest of California, Ord, now a first lieutenant, together with Lieut. William Tecumseh Sherman, also of the 3rd artillery, played important roles in the maintenance of order. Early in 1850, Ord was assigned to Fort Independence, Massachusetts, from which he dated his letter. He returned to the Pacific coast after some two years, and remained there until the outbreak of the Civil War, except for a brief eastern assignment in 1859.

Ord's correspondent, Isaac I. Stevens, at that time a major of engineers in the U. S. coast survey, was the same age as Ord, and the two had graduated from West Point in the same class. During the Mexican War, Stevens served as an engineering adjutant on the staff of Gen. Winfield Scott; he then turned his attention to the vast area which had been annexed to the United States and to the part which the army would play in its defense and development. Stevens wanted a share in the work. He saw in New Mexico or in Texas "... a field for such of us as will go there with a determination to carve one out, if it is not, in consequence of the stupidity of superiors, offered us."²

The task of defending the new area necessitated, according to Stevens, a reorganization of the army on the frontier. The military administration of the region, he feared, would be more concerned with carrying out existing systems than with modifying those systems to meet the changed circumstances. The problem was: "How shall the question of the public defense in New Mexico be solved?" He conceived the plan of sending military colonies into the southwest, made up of farmers and artisans with their families, who would not only form a nucleus for an agricultural settlement but would provide a military force sufficient to keep the hostile Indian tribes in check.³ While considering the problem, Stevens wrote to fellow army officers in all parts of the country, particularly to those

who had seen frontier service, seeking advice and information. Ord wrote the following letter in response to Stevens' inquiries.⁴

The letter, published here for the first time, is in the Stevens Papers at the University of Washington Library. The original spelling has been preserved throughout; occasional paragraphing and punctuation have been introduced to conform with printing requirements.

THE LETTER

Ft. Independence Mass July 23^d, 52

My Dear Stevens,

As you desire in yours of the 19th inst. I will give you my ideas on the explorations needed, *if* we are to attempt an open road of any sort, to the pacific, across our present territory; and then Ill tell you, why such open road will not be made.

Parties to examine the great Basin and unsettled districts between the plains and Pacific should be fitted out as near the scene of operations as possible, and be composed of people interested in the result — i.e., they should, for the great Basin, start from the vicinity of Los Angeles Calia — from the Mormon country — or from Santa Fe. They should have so large a fighting force as not to be afraid of the settled or hostile Indian districts, and should invite gold hunters and traders to accompany them; providing that all who remained with the party should conform to the orders of its Commander — at present, & until such explorations satisfy us of the contrary — the whole of the country we received from Mexico at the treaty, except Texas & the strip of California between the Snowy Mountains & the Coast, is not found fit for occupation of *any* kind, except in remote and isolated valleys cut off from home by high & almost impassable mountain ranges, and by wide dry plains — these valleys are tis true when watered exceedingly fertile, like those of upper Asia & Africa — but destitute of navigable Rivers — connecting with the sea & hence unsuited to a commercial Republic — and we see that chiefs of Colonies — in New Mexico & Deseret have abused the unrestrained power which their isolated position gives them.

To establish a military Force at a series of these valleys even though the distance between the valleys most removed from each other should not exceed a hundred miles — would cost the government about three million dollars. Supposing there to be fifteen Posts from Independence via Santa Fe to the valley of the Mohave, near the Southern extremity of California; and each Post to maintain 100 men, such is the number of desertions and casualties that 3000 troops must be enlisted and paid, to maintain half that force in this wilderness — it would then cost two mil-

lion dollars per annum to maintain these posts in food clothing and such necessaries as would have to be sent them — (not including the pay of officers and men), estimating at about the same rate per thousand lbs, as it now costs to transport provisions &c to the troops at the mouth of the Gila—by land—and not including the loss of life and property due to Indian hostilities, which, in case of a general war with the indians of the mountains around the great basin would far exceed those of the Florida war: Such a war I look upon as inevitable if we now attempt, to Colonise this Country in *any* way — the great elevated plains and mountain regions of Asia, Africa, Australia & South America, have never been settled by a quiet or agricultural people and even were we, to kill all the Indians now in these districts, they would be succeeded by predatory bands of whites & negroes, similar to the Tartars — & Arabs — and more difficult to manage than the indians — Cortez showed us the way to the Pacific — he went there at once & sent expeditions to California; while we over the widest if not worst part of North America have been more than three hundred years reaching that coast.

I have said nothing about the route to the Pacific, by what is called the northern pass in contradistinction to the southern pass, but this has long been the favorite way of the Hudson Bay Companie's employees, i.e. the voyageurs! (it has the advantage of long stages by water, going from Lake Superior by the chain of Lakes followed by Sir George Simpson into northern Oregon) because the English aware of the convenience of this route have kept it mostly within their Territory — the continent or that part of it from Lake Superior to Puget Sound is narrower than it is from any part of the Mississippi valley to the Pacific — as can be seen from a glance at the map and allowing for the short degrees of Longitude in high northern latitudes —

I have hinted above at the short and peopled route to the Pacific. The government of Mexico is not on so firm a base as to be beyond price, and for much less than it could cost to establish and keep open for five years a common road to the Pacific they would gladly sell the use of their northern provinces, which are now abandoned by them, and will soon be occupied by foreigners — if *we* do not take them.

Free Soilers cannot keep negroes from breeding, and to fix Geographical limits, when the press of population is increasing is as grinding a tyranny on them as prohibiting Emigration, until they have to kill their children, is *to the Chinese* — The mastery exercised over Slaves in the U. States is *solely* owing to the demand for products which no other

labor than theirs can be found to produce — this will not be the case in northern Mexico — a high cool & mountainous region — & I would look upon it as a benefit to whites Blacks and Indians for the U. S. to possess northern Mexico open it to all, and let nature take its course—*Now*, that country is but the prey of wild Apaches —

As for the upper Colorado Country, I think it is the best and only part of the wild district, which has and will continue to support much life, these long rivers made from the small mountain streams & lakes all run through mountain Districts and have deep & rapid beds — I mean ken-yons or canons as they are called in places many hundred feet deep, but their headwaters do not flow from & through such inhospitable regions — hence examinations may be made of the upper Colorado from Mormon valley with great advantage to the Mormons, but the depot at Deseret must be of a large regular force under sufficient discipline to protect itself from Mormon aggression, and spending money enough to make their presence desired — the Mormons have rendered good service under Regular Officers and could be made to do so again — in concert with regulars if they thought their interests to do so —

these ideas are the result more of reading of & conversing with travelers than of my own travels, though I do *know* something of the Country spoken of.

Yours truly,

[signed] E. O. C. Ord

[written in margin of first page]

I am not very well just now or I would write you more at length — you will find in the Topographical Bureau my copy of the original map of Padre Font⁵ — who gives Father Garces route through this country⁶ — his description of it you will find in *Fontes California* — there is a small German map⁷ pasted up in the asst to Col Aberts room — which contains some items of importance.

NOTES

1. H. H. Bancroft, *History of California*, IV, 759; V, 518, 520; see also Ord to his brothers, James and Pacificus, at the gold mines, May 21, 1849, in "Dr. John S. Griffin's Mail," *Calif. Hist. Soc. Quarterly*, XXXIV (Mar. 1955), 22-23; and Bernarr Cresap, "Early California as Described by Edward O. C. Ord," *Pac. Hist. Rev.*, XXI (Nov. 1952), 340.

2. Isaac I. Stevens to G. W. Smith [n.d.], quoted in Hazard Stevens, *The Life of Isaac Ingalls Stevens* (Boston, 1900), I, 262-63.

3. Stevens to Maj. H. L. Kendrick, July 28, 1851, in Isaac I. Stevens Papers, Univ. Washington Library, Seattle.

4. In addition to the Ord letter, the Stevens Papers contain letters from other officers on the reorganization of the army on the western frontier. In 1853, Stevens was appointed governor of Washington Territory and placed in charge of one of the expeditions for the survey of a transcontinental railroad route.

5. A reproduction of Padre Pedro Font's map is given in Bancroft's *History of California*, I, facing p. 262; see also p. 259 (note).

6. See H. E. Rensch, "Fages' Crossing of the Cuyamacas," *Calif. Hist. Soc. Quarterly*, XXXIV (Sept. 1955), p. 194.

7. Possibly Preuss' map of 1848, in *H. Ex. Doc.* 17, 31st Cong., 1st sess., p. 944.