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# Albert Miller Lea

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# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Albert Miller Lea

On Tuesday morning, August 11, 1835, three men pushed a canoe into the current of the Raccoon River and shortly afterward floated out on the waters of the Des Moines. One of the men was a private soldier, one a Sauk Indian. The third, obviously in command, was Lieutenant Albert Miller Lea, to whom had been assigned the task of exploring the Des Moines River from the Raccoon Fork to its mouth.

Three days earlier, the cottonwood tree from which the canoe was made had been growing by the river. No human voice disturbed the silence of the surrounding prairie. Then had come the tramp of horses' feet, the sound of axes, the smoke of fires, quick commands, as three companies (about 160 men) of the First United States Dragoons camped on the north bank of the Raccoon. Now the weary horses were plodding southward and the prairies were quiet again. To the east, the sun was rising over the hill on which the State

Capitol of Iowa now stands. Drops of water sparkled in its rays as the paddles rose and fell; then the canoe disappeared in the distance.

Two months earlier (June 7th) the men had mounted their horses at Fort Des Moines (on the west bank of the Mississippi River a few miles north of the mouth of the Des Moines), and started on the journey which was to take them over eleven hundred miles, chiefly in the area now included in the State of Iowa.

Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny was in command. Captain Nathaniel Boone (a son of Daniel Boone) commanded Company H, Lieutenant Henry S. Turner Company B, and Lieutenant Lea was in charge of Company I, Captain Jesse B. Browne having been compelled to return on account of illness. Five four-horse wagons with supplies and a drove of beef cattle — provisions transported by their own power — added variety to the cavalcade as it wound over the prairie.

The line of march lay northwestward to the Raccoon Fork of the Des Moines where a site for a new military post was to be chosen. The Indian guides missed that destination, however, and the expedition reached the Des Moines at Prospect Hill, about fifty miles above the Raccoon junction. Lieutenant Colonel Kearny decided to postpone the selection of a site for the post on the Des

Moines until the return trip and led his men north-eastward to the foot of Lake Pepin and then south to Wabasha's village on the Mississippi where, in accordance with orders, a conference was held with the Sioux.

Late in July the detachment moved across the lake region in what is now southern Minnesota, then turned south to strike the main course of the Des Moines. Captain Browne had rejoined his company and Lieutenant Lea, who had taken upon himself the duties of topographer, was busy with his notes and maps. To one of the lakes in this region, which he named Fox Lake, J. N. Nicollet later gave the name of Albert Lea. Under the drowsy August sun, the dragoons moved south along the west side of the Des Moines to the Raccoon, and there, on Sunday, August 9th, Lieutenant Lea received orders to descend the Des Moines for the purpose of studying the character of the river and the possibilities of its navigation. He was also to pick out locations suitable for military posts.

In spite of gnats, mosquitoes, and sand-bars, the journey was accomplished safely and Lieutenant Lea with his two assistants was back at Fort Des Moines several days before the main division reached there on August 19th, also without mishap. The dragoons — the marines of the prairie

and the plains — had completed one more “job”, but as we shall see, the pen in this case was mightier than the sword.

Lieutenant Lea made a report to Lieutenant Colonel Kearny (dated September 8, 1835). The distance covered in the canoe he estimated at 266 miles. Navigation, he believed, would be difficult because of rapids, sand-bars, snags, low water in summer, freshets in the spring and fall, and ice in the winter. He suggested three possible sites for a fort near the Raccoon Fork and declared that the mouth of Cedar River (Cedar Creek, a branch of the Des Moines) was the best location of all. Lea was evidently much impressed by the Des Moines and its valley for he added at the close of his report: “Allow me to remark in conclusion, that the Des Moines is the most beautiful stream that I have ever traversed: and that it is destined soon to become the outlet of great mineral and agricultural wealth.”

Lieutenant Colonel Kearny included this report in the one he made to the War Department, adding at the close, “I have delayed this Report, that I might accompany it with a map made by Lieut Lea which was taken with much care, & is as correct, as circumstances would admit”. This map and a journal of some kind kept by Lieutenant Lea as topographical officer were sent to Washington

early in November, 1835, but can not now be located. There was evidently some disagreement between Lieutenant Lea and his commanding officer concerning this map, for Lea wrote later, "he [Kearny] took it from me, disallowing a copy, although all my work on the march and in quarters was wholly voluntary, not trenching upon duties, and the product was as much my private property as my hand."

Who was this Lieutenant Lea? He signed his report "A. M. Lea, of Tenn." He was a native of that State. Born on a farm near Knoxville on July 23, 1808, Albert Miller Lea was next to the youngest child of a family of seven sons and a daughter. His father, named Major Lea, was the son of a Baptist preacher who had come to Tennessee during the Revolution. Major Lea married Lavinia Jarnagin, daughter of Thomas Jarnagin who, though unlettered, was a shrewd business man and served as register of the land office of the State of Franklin. By purchasing soldiers' certificates and locating them in the valley of Richland Creek, Jarnagin acquired a large estate which was divided among his numerous family. To Lavinia fell a tract in the lower valley which became Richland, the birthplace of Albert Miller Lea.

To the springs in this vicinity came aristocratic visitors from the South reminding the Lea boys of

the world outside the valley, the gateway to which was education. Albert Miller Lea was sent to a school in Knoxville taught by a graduate of Yale, but at seventeen financial difficulties and poor health compelled him to withdraw and for a time he worked on the farm, clerked in a store, and taught Latin on the side. In 1827 he secured an appointment to West Point (through Hugh L. White), graduating in 1831, fifth in his class of thirty-three, with the rank of brevet second lieutenant. He was reported to be one of the five graduates excelling in mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry, engineering, French, rhetoric, moral philosophy, artillery and tactics.

Lieutenant Lea was assigned to the First Artillery, but, being gallant enough to wish to please a lady, the betrothed of his friend John B. Magruder, who had graduated in 1830, he (it is said) exchanged duty at Old Point Comfort for service with the Seventh Infantry at Fort Gibson (at the junction of the Arkansas and Neosho rivers in what is now eastern Oklahoma). Lea at that time planned to study law and thought a remote post would be a good place to pursue his reading.

The army, however, was no respecter of plans and Lieutenant Lea was sent hither and yon on topographical service. In the summer of 1832, he worked on the survey of the Tennessee River and

spent the following winter in Philadelphia preparing maps and reports. Of his activities during this winter Lea wrote long afterward: "I made for Col. Long the plans for the first locomotive ever made by the Baldwins, besides studying French and music and drawing, attending the theatre, and flirting not a little."

In the spring of 1834 Lieutenant Lea was ordered to return to Fort Gibson, but at Washington he was delayed by a transfer (rather against his will) to the United States Dragoon regiment recently organized. His time was not, however, entirely wasted, for he took advantage of the opportunity to visit Baltimore where lived Miss Ellen Shoemaker, to whom he proposed marriage, but almost immediately received orders to join his regiment.

Upon reaching St. Louis, Lea volunteered to make a trip to New Orleans (then so full of yellow fever that officers were sent there only with their consent) to get \$96,000 in silver for Indian annuities, and it was not until October, 1834, that he reported at Fort Leavenworth. There he was ordered to join Kearny's detachment of dragoons at Fort Des Moines. During the summer of 1835 he participated in the expedition up and down the Des Moines Valley and across the southeast corner of present-day Minnesota.

Lieutenant Lea spent the early part of the following winter at Fort Des Moines, but secured leave of absence on February 1, 1836, and soon went east. His experience on the trip and his conversations with settlers, soldiers, and traders convinced him that the Iowa country had a bright future and he planned to have some part in it. He made a trip up the Mississippi River, stopping at various locations to consider investments in land. At Burlington he bought four lots for \$100, selling them later for \$400. He declined an offer of a claim at what is now Muscatine for fifty dollars, and chose some land at the mouth of Pine Creek (about ten miles above Muscatine), where he and William Gordon, another Tennessean, laid out a town site.

Lieutenant Lea was, however, interested in the whole area and publicity being not unknown a hundred years ago he decided that a book advertising the Black Hawk Purchase would be useful to prospective settlers and profitable to him. He wrote the text, secured permission to make a copy of his map which Kearny had sent to the War Department, and in the summer of 1836, his *Notes on Wisconsin Territory, Particularly with Reference to the Iowa District*, was printed by H. S. Tanner of Philadelphia.

Lea's book was a small paper-bound volume

approximately three by five inches, containing 53 pages and a folded map of the Iowa District about 18½ by 22 inches. The edition was a thousand copies which were to sell at a dollar a volume, but, unfortunately, half the books were lost in shipment down the Ohio on a steamboat and only a few reached the West. The undertaking was, therefore, a financial loss and not especially satisfactory as an advertising venture. The little book was not, however, entirely without effect. It contained an accurate and enthusiastic description of the region he had seen in 1835, and the name Iowa which he applied to the Black Hawk Purchase was adopted for the Territory and the State that contained that district.

In spite of his many interests, Lieutenant Lea did not forget his Baltimore romance and on May 5, 1836, he married Miss Ellen Shoemaker, whom he had wooed in the summer of 1834. Apparently he did not believe that army life would agree with his bride who was not robust for he resigned his commission in the army to take effect on the thirty-first of May. In July the Leas made the trip to Iowa, by the lakes to Chicago, by wagon to Galena, and then south by steamboat to the site on Pine Creek which he had named Iowa. Later he called it Ellenborough for his wife.

Of this dream town Lea wrote in his book:

“Should the seat of government of the future State of Iowa be located on the Mississippi, it would probably be fixed at Iowa, owing to the central position and commercial advantages of that place; and if it be located in the interior, it must be near the Iowa river, as the weight of population will be there; and then the town of Iowa will be the nearest port in the Mississippi to the Capital of the State.” But this rose-hued dream of the capital and the port faded as did many others on the frontier and the only evidences of Lieutenant Lea’s industry in laying out this town of Iowa were the stakes which for several years served as tombstones of buried hopes.

Early in 1837, Lea became chief engineer of the State of Tennessee, but the panic ended the work there and in August, 1838, he came back to Iowa as the United States commissioner to locate the Iowa-Missouri boundary. Missouri failed to appoint a commissioner and Lea declared that the Iowa representative (Doctor James Davis) was “no use but to consume rations, and soon left.” Lea’s report was made on January 19, 1839. In it he pointed out the inconsistencies of the various boundaries and asserted that the Sullivan line, later approved by the United States Supreme Court, was the equitable though not the legal boundary.

For most of 1839 and 1840, Lea worked as

assistant engineer of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. During these months his wife was ill, apparently with tuberculosis. She died in February, 1840, leaving one son, Edward. That summer he attempted to interest a syndicate in his Iowa lands, and made a trip to Burlington to get a charter, but the plan did not materialize. It was possibly on this visit to Iowa that Lea received the commission as brigadier general of the Iowa militia which appears on the list of his achievements in the record of West Point graduates.

Lea might have continued his railroad work, for it was the beginning of the building era, but he accepted a position as chief clerk of the War Department, serving for a time as Acting Secretary of War, only to find that, in the transition from Harrison to Tyler, political preferment was another mirage. He returned to Tennessee and from 1843 to 1851 taught mathematics and natural philosophy at the University of East Tennessee at Knoxville, at the same time assisting his widowed mother in the management of her farm and slaves. For several years he also served as city engineer of Knoxville. Apparently the military opportunities of the Mexican War had no attractions for him.

In the summer of 1845, Lea returned to Baltimore, married Miss Catherine Heath, and brought

his wife and his son by the former marriage back to Tennessee. To this wife were born three sons and a daughter.

In 1851 Lea undertook to operate a glass works at Knoxville, but there was no market for the ware and he lost not only his own savings but those of several investors. Again he went back to his surveying, this time as chief engineer of two railroad companies in Texas and Mexico — the Aransas Railroad Company in Texas and the Rio Grande, Mexico, and Pacific Railroad Company of Mexico. This work was getting under way when the Civil War began.

The story of Albert Miller Lea in the Civil War was unusually tragic. Like many other Southern men who held or had held commissions in the United States Army, Lea was compelled to decide between conflicting loyalties — nation and State. As he had signed his report in 1835 "A. M. Lea, of Tenn." so also in 1861 he emphasized his State, and joined the South. At first, it appears, he was engaged in enlisting a cavalry regiment for the Confederate Army, for on August 20, 1861, Lea wrote to the War Department at Richmond, protesting that certain discriminations were discouraging enlistments by former unionists of whom there were many in east Tennessee.

Albert M. Lea did not become prominent in the

Civil War although he served the Confederacy faithfully and well. Lea himself claimed that his failure to receive recognition was due to the enmity of Jefferson Davis. In August, 1861, President Davis did, however, nominate Lea (who had been serving as brigade commissary) as major in the Commissary Department. This list of commissions was not confirmed, but in September, 1862, Lea's nomination as captain in the Quartermaster's Department was approved by the Confederate Congress. No commission above that of captain is included in the nominations made by President Davis, but by direct appointment of commanding officers Lea usually served as major, and sometimes as lieutenant colonel or colonel.

In the summer of 1862, Major Lea did some engineering work on the fortifications around Cumberland Gap, but was soon afterward transferred to the Texas front and there one of the poignant tragedies peculiar to civil wars was enacted. On his way to join his command, Lea stopped at Galveston, just as the Confederates began to move for the recapture of the city and harbor. He reported to the commander in charge — the same John B. Magruder with whom Lea is said to have traded locations thirty years before — and was assigned to duty.

Major Lea knew that his oldest son, Lieutenant

Commander Edward Lea, was on one of the Union vessels in the harbor. This son had been with the United States navy in Chinese waters when the war began and Lea had written to him that he could not dictate to one so long "obligated to act on his own judgment" and that, decide as the son might, he would continue to regard him "with the respect of a gentleman and the affection of a father".

And so it happened on the first of January, 1863, that Major Lea, as a member of the staff of General Magruder, went on board the captured Union sloop of war, the *Harriet Lane*, to find his son terribly wounded and the captain dead. While the father was trying frantically to get an ambulance, the son died, saying to those who asked him what he wished, "My father is here". Lieutenant Lea and his superior officer, Captain Wainwright, were buried the following day with military and masonic honors, Major Lea reading part of the funeral service.

Three weeks later General Magruder wrote to his commanding officer at Richmond saying he had sent a detachment to the Rio Grande and that Major Lea was in command of the engineers. After commenting on Lea's service at Galveston, Magruder wrote: "He is a graduate of West Point, of great merit, and well known to His Ex-

cellency the President, to whom I beg leave to recommend him for the appointment of colonel in the C. S. Army for engineer duty with me."

For the remainder of the Civil War Lea was assigned to duty at various places in Texas. On December 7, 1863, he was mentioned as having charge of slaves working on the fortifications at Gonzales and in March, 1864, he was in charge of the cotton bureau at Eagle Pass. One son, Alexander McKim Lea, though very young, was also in the Confederate army.

At the close of the Civil War, Lea settled in Galveston where he opened a book store, but he soon returned to his engineering work and became city surveyor and engineer of Galveston. A long illness, due partly to war service, compelled his retirement and in 1874 he moved to Corsicana, Texas, where his two sons were in business. There he spent the remainder of his life, and there he died on January 16, 1891.

Although the Lea family was of the Baptist faith, Albert Miller Lea became a member of the Protestant Episcopal Church, to which both his wives belonged. He was for years senior warden of St. John's Episcopal Church at Corsicana, which he had helped to found. A window of this church bears his name and that of his wife.

Writing took up part of his time and several

articles in the *Iowa Historical Record* and in Minnesota newspapers recall the story of Lea's relation to Iowa and Minnesota and his service in the Civil War. In June, 1879, Lea went back to southern Minnesota to deliver an address at Albert Lea on the banks of the lake named for him, but for the most part he was satisfied with his books, his garden, his memories, and his family ties. Catherine Lea, his second wife, died in 1884, but his daughter, Miss Lida L. Lea (still living in 1935 at Corsicana), a son, and several grandchildren survived him.

By some ironic fate the name of Albert M. Lea does not appear on the map of Iowa, although there is some evidence that Lee County was really named for him and that the name was misspelled. But the pages of his little book, printed almost one hundred years ago, are mute witnesses to the part Albert Miller Lea, the chronicler of Iowa as it was in 1835, played in naming this Commonwealth.

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