



GENERAL HYLAN B. LYON

A Kentucky Confederate and the War in the West

Dan Lee

GENERAL HYLAN B. LYON

GENERAL HYLAN B. LYON

A Kentucky Confederate and the War in the West

Dan Lee



Copyright © 2019 by The University of Tennessee Press / Knoxville.
All Rights Reserved. Manufactured in the United States of America.
First Edition.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lee, Dan, 1954– author.

Title: General Hylan B. Lyon : a Kentucky Confederate and the war in the West /
Dan Lee.

Description: First edition. | Knoxville : The University of Tennessee Press, [2019] |
Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2018058790 (print) | LCCN 2018060328 (ebook) | ISBN
9781621904885 (Kindle) | ISBN 9781621904892 (pdf) | ISBN 9781621904878
(hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Lyon, Hylan B. (Hylan Benton), 1836–1907. | United States—
History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Biography. | United States—History—Civil War,
1861–1865—Campaigns. | Generals—Confederate States of America—Biography. |
Kentucky—Biography.

Classification: LCC E467.1.L896 (ebook) | LCC E467.1.L896 L44 2019 (print) | DDC
355.0092 [B] —dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018058790>

This book is for Hazel

He was the biggest thing in their sight and in his own too; who went to war to protect it and lost the war and returned home to find that he had lost more than the war even, though not absolutely all; who said *At least I have life left.*

—William Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!*

CONTENTS

Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
1. Far From Home	1
2. The Coeur d'Alene War	12
3. The Mullan Road	26
4. The War between the States Begins	36
5. Prisoner	60
6. The Vicksburg Campaigns	70
7. The Army of Relief	92
8. The War Child and the Wizard	103
9. The Federals Take Their Turn	121
10. Forrest Resurgent	133
11. Johnsonville	147
12. Lyon's Kentucky Raid	162
13. "An Illusive Cuss"	181
14. Mexico	194
15. Kentucky	203
16. The Final Reunion	220
Notes	223
Bibliography	249
Index	265

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

General Lyon, c. 1864	xvi
Ft. Vancouver, c. 1855	14
Simon Bolivar Buckner, c. 1861	42
General Pemberton	71
General Wheeler, c. 1863	104
General Forrest, c. 1863	107
The Federal Supply Depot at Johnsonville, Tennessee, 1864	153
Ruins of the Burned Christian County Courthouse	165

Maps

Lyon's Civil War: The Upper South	35
Lyon's Civil War: The Deep South	69

PREFACE

Many years ago, the *Courier-Journal Magazine* asked the question, “Is Kentucky Southern?” Geographers have occasionally tried to place the Bluegrass State in the Midwest. Those scholars who belong to the Midwest school of thought are persuasive. Kentucky grows corn, beans, and tobacco, not sugar cane, peanuts, and cotton. In the pre-settlement era, the Shawnee and other nations from north of the Ohio River had a traditional claim to Kentucky as a hunting ground that was as valid as that of the Southern Indians. Virginians who would become Kentuckians won Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan from the British in the American Revolution, and, after the war, great numbers of Kentuckians settled in the land between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. In the War of 1812, feeling a paternalistic concern for what was then called the Northwest, Kentuckians volunteered by the hundreds to march north of the Ohio and fight the British and their native allies in Tecumseh’s confederacy; many more fought in the North under William Henry Harrison than in the South with Andrew Jackson.

These geographers who advocate for a Midwestern identity for Kentucky regard the Ohio River not as a barrier between regions, but as a shared trade route, and they point to the vigorous trade that existed between Kentucky and the Midwest in both the antebellum and the post-Civil War periods. One need only look at the examples of the twin cities that looked across the river at one another, Covington and Cincinnati, Louisville and Jeffersonville, and Henderson and Evansville, to see that Kentucky had a natural and irreversible connection to the north. No such metropolitan areas of common economic bonds were found on the border with Tennessee. Neither did ancestry settle the issue in favor of the South. It was true that many Kentuckians traced their ancestry to Virginia and the Carolinas and equally true that many other Kentuckians traced their ancestry to Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and even Vermont.

While these geographers make some excellent arguments, there *is* a case to be made for placing Kentucky in the South. It is well below the Mason-Dixon

Line, which would run just south of Columbus, Ohio, and Indianapolis, Indiana, if it were extended westward. In cuisine and regional accent, Kentucky is Southern, as well, and also in what Bill Ferris, director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, called the commonwealth's "dichotomy." Ferris said, "The dichotomy, that tension which Kentucky symbolizes, Bourbon and poor white, Republican and Democrat, slave and abolitionist, old and new, all of which Kentucky is well known for, is Southern." Sociologist John Shelton Reed of the University of North Carolina approached the question by posing a single, pertinent question which he considered the "litmus test." He asked, "Where do the natives consider themselves Southerners?" The result? Kentucky was "firmly in the South."¹

By all measures, this feeling of Southern-ness has not diminished in the years since the *Courier-Journal* first asked the question; if anything, Kentuckians have become more entrenched in their identification with the South. The fact that modern Kentuckians identify themselves so thoroughly as Southern loyalists would be a surprise to their ancestors. At the beginning of the Civil War, Kentucky held to the Union and did not secede. Historians Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter point out that "between twenty-five thousand and forty thousand Kentuckians fought for the Confederacy, between ninety thousand and one hundred thousand for the Union," a difference of as much as four to one in the North's favor.²

Their state's stubborn adherence to the North put the Confederate officers who hailed from Kentucky in a peculiar situation, none more than the three dozen or so who became generals. They were foreigners in the new country whose gray uniform they wore, and they were enemies of the nation and the state where they were born. And because their state had not seceded, they usually found themselves leading men from states not their own. Often, their units were from the states to which these men had moved after leaving Kentucky. Several of them led with distinction in the Trans-Mississippi, particularly Missouri and Arkansas. There, General Joseph O. Shelby is the standout. Shelby was born in Kentucky and kept close ties to the state, but he lived most of his adult life in Missouri. Shelby was one of the great cavalry officers of the war, and when the war was lost he led a column of men to exile in Mexico; it was one of the legendary marches of American history.

Among the other Kentuckians in the Trans-Mississippi were Thomas J. Churchill and Samuel B. Maxey, both of whom attained the rank of general before the war was a year old. At the same time, some Kentuckians who were or who would become generals made names for themselves in the Eastern Theatre. Gustavus W. Smith commanded the Aquia District in the Department of Northern Virginia and led one wing at Seven Pines and briefly succeeded a wounded General J. E. Johnson. William T. Martin rode

with J. E. B. Stuart, and Jerome Bonaparte Robertson served under James Longstreet. Some saw their first battles in the East, and then came to join the fighting west of the Appalachians. Richard Taylor was the son of the Mexican War General and 12th President Zachary Taylor and also the one-time brother-in-law of Jefferson Davis (another Kentuckian in service to the Confederacy). The Kentucky-born Taylor grew up in Louisiana and was there when the war began. Taylor led his Louisianans at the Battle of First Manassas, and he was in Stonewall Jackson's Valley Campaign as well as the Seven Days Before Richmond. Then he was transferred west. He became a district commander and ended the war in charge of the Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana. One of the highest ranked Kentuckians in the Confederacy, though by no means one of the most gifted, was General John Bell Hood. He, like Taylor, had seen his first fighting in the East. He commanded a division in Longstreet's Corps and came west with him during the Chickamauga Campaign of 1863. Longstreet eventually returned to the East; Hood stayed in the West. He became the commander of the Army of Tennessee, and hurled it forward to its destruction at the Battles of Franklin and Nashville.

However, as Harrison and Klotter point out, there *were* Kentucky Confederates in the rank and file, and in some instances there were Kentucky-born generals leading Kentuckians in battle. Kentucky's most famous Confederate unit was the First Kentucky Brigade, better known as the Orphan Brigade. An impressive list of prominent Kentucky generals led the Orphans through the war. They included Roger Hanson, Ben Hardin Helm, Joseph H. Lewis, and John C. Breckinridge. It was Breckinridge, now promoted to division command, who gave the brigade its name after the Battle of Stones River. The argument can be made that Breckinridge was the greatest Confederate from the Bluegrass State in talent, temperament, and accomplishments. He had been the Vice-President of the United States, a presidential candidate in 1860, and he was a U.S. Senator at the time the war began. He left the Union to become one of the South's most gallant battlefield commanders, and he ended the war as the Confederate Secretary of War. After Breckinridge had served for a time as Secretary of War and his qualities could be fairly judged, Robert E. Lee said of him, "He is a great man. I was acquainted with him as Congressman and Vice-President and as one of our Generals, but I did not know him until he was secretary of war, and he is a lofty, pure strong man." Another of the Orphans' commanders, Ben Hardin Helm, was Abraham Lincoln's brother-in-law. The President was desperately interested in enlisting Helm in the Northern cause. He offered Helm the position of Union paymaster, with the rank of major. Helm refused, and when he was killed on the second day at Chickamauga, the White House was thrown into a deep gloom. The Lincolns

were criticized for their grief over the death of an enemy officer and for their courtesy to his widow.³

Besides the Orphans, there was another brigade of Kentuckians in the Confederate Army. It was the Third Brigade in General Abraham Buford's division of Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry corps. It was usually called simply the Kentucky Brigade. During some of the bloodiest epochs of the war, the brigade was commanded by Colonel Hylan B. Lyon of Eddyville. Nathaniel C. Hughes says, "Forrest did not possess a more professional, experienced brigade commander than this young, energetic Kentuckian." Lyon was a West Point graduate. He was a veteran of the Third Seminole War in Florida and of the Coeur d'Alene War in Washington Territory. He was back home in Lyon County, Kentucky, on a leave of absence when the trouble between North and South boiled over. He had returned to Kentucky with the desire to resign from the army, marry, and become a farmer. The firing on Fort Sumter followed by President Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers changed his plans. Although he had just received a promotion to 1st lieutenant, 3rd U.S. Artillery, he resigned his commission and immediately began to raise a company of Southern loyalists. Lyon and his men marched south to Tennessee where like-minded men were gathering. Lyon's Confederate career, during which he rose through the ranks from captain to brigadier general, was one of sacrifice and devotion to an insurgent nation that was the enemy to all he had known before 1861, to the country that had educated him and the state that had nurtured him.

Like so many of his fellow Confederate officers, Lyon hesitated to return to Kentucky when the war was lost. He and the others did not realize that Kentucky had changed in the four years of war. The harsh rule of the occupying Federals and the emancipation issue had made Kentucky more in sympathy with the South; so it was that the returning Confederate officers, like Lyon, were not ostracized; they were celebrated, and many of them went on to win political office and to serve Kentucky in other ways as if the "late unpleasantness" had never occurred. During the war, Lyon had been admired for his courage—he was called by one subordinate "amongst the bravest of the brave"—but there was little warmth in the admiration. He did not inspire the kind of affection that his fellow Kentuckians Simon Bolivar Buckner and John C. Breckinridge attracted. It was not until his later years, long after the war, that Lyon became the object of something approaching the devotion that men of a more accessible personality had enjoyed all along. His public service was no doubt responsible, at least in part, for his newfound popularity.⁴

This is the story of General Hylan B. Lyon, a West Point graduate, a respected soldier of the United States who renounced his nation, went to war, and returned in the end to serve his state honorably.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank:

Linda A. Lee

Steven L. Wright

Tammy Snook, City Historian/Curator/Interpretive Park Ranger, City of Yuma, Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area, & Yuma Quartermaster Depot State Historic Park, Yuma, CA

Lucas Griswold, Visitor Services Supervisor, Boston Harbor Islands National and State Park, MA Department of Conservation and Recreation

The staff at Mississippi's Last Stands Visitor & Interpretive Center, Baldwin, MS

The staff at the Glenn E. Martin Genealogy Library, Princeton, KY

The staff of the Kentucky Museum and Library at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY

The staff of the Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray State University, Murray, KY

Sasha Jovanovic for the cartography.



General Lyon, c. 1864. MOLLUS Mass. Collection, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA.

I

FAR FROM HOME

Hylan Benton Lyon was born February 22, 1836, near Eddyville, Kentucky. His family was prosperous, the overseers of an impressive business and farming empire, but material wealth was not his most important birthright. What proved to be more important to H. B. Lyon was his family's century-long tradition of rebellion.

His great-grandfather was an Irish insurrectionist, the leader of a group called the White Boys. The White Boys opposed Ireland's British landlords. Government authorities captured and executed the elder Lyon about 1762. In 1765, his son, Matthew Lyon, boarded a ship for America. In the decade that followed, Lyon became increasingly involved with the rebellious colonials, particularly after 1771, when he married Mary Hosford, the niece of Ethan Allen. The young couple joined Allen's colony of settlers in the country west of the Green Mountains in what is now Vermont. Revolution was brewing in all of New England, and Allen became the leader of a rebel group called the Green Mountain Boys. Matthew Lyon was one of them.

In the first year of the Revolution, Lyon helped capture Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point and later claimed that he worked the first cannon ever fired in the cause of American liberty. He took part in General Richard Montgomery's invasion of Canada, after which he was promoted to colonel. He left the army in 1778 to pursue a business and political career in Rutland County, Vermont. In 1782, Lyon's wife Mary died, leaving their son and daughters motherless. The next year, he married Beulah Chittenden Galusha, a widow. During their nearly forty years of marriage, Beulah Lyon would bear her husband eight more children. Six of them survived to adulthood.

In 1796, Lyon, a Jeffersonian, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. He served two turbulent terms before deciding to leave Vermont for the West. He dispatched a colony of friends and family members to a site at the mouth of Eddy Creek, a tributary of the Cumberland River, near the nascent village of Eddyville in present day Lyon County, Kentucky. He joined

them there with another group of settlers in 1801, after the end of his second term in Congress. He called his farm Riverview.

The seventy people who accompanied Matthew Lyon from Vermont found themselves among a strange people in their new home on the Cumberland. They were mostly settlers from Virginia and the Carolinas, and while they possessed an abundance of hospitality, they were shockingly destitute of books. Even more disquieting to the Northern newcomers than the widespread illiteracy was the practice of slavery. The Lyons opposed slavery. Mrs. Lyon was particularly outspoken in her disapproval, and it nearly destroyed her satisfaction with Kentucky, but Matthew Lyon was undoubtedly more effective in his own rebellion against the peculiar institution. It is true that Lyon leased slaves from their masters for his various business and farming interests, but he became known in the slave community as a white man who could be trusted. Many runaway slaves came to beg him to buy their freedom, which he did. He set them free when they performed labor equal in dollars to what he had paid for them. Untold numbers of former slaves owed their freedom to Lyon's personal emancipation efforts.

In 1802, Matthew Lyon resumed his political career. He was elected to the Kentucky General Assembly, and, after only one year, he had become so well regarded that he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. He remained in office until his opposition to the War of 1812 cost him the support of his constituents, who failed to return him to office. The war ruined Lyon. Risky investments left him \$28,000 in debt. His sons rescued him from defaulting and the disgrace of a bankruptcy, but his life in Kentucky came to an end. He finagled an appointment from President James Monroe as factor of the Cherokee Nation in Arkansas. From then on, his sons Chittenden and Matthew would be the important Lyons in Kentucky. Matthew Lyon, Sr. died in Arkansas on August 1, 1822, and was buried there, but his sons had the body disinterred in 1833 and returned to Kentucky for reburial in the Eddyville Cemetery overlooking the Cumberland River.

After Matthew Lyon's death, Chittenden Lyon became the acknowledged head of the extended clan. He was the oldest son of Matthew and Beulah Lyon and was in personality the spitting image of his father. Thompson A. Lyon, Chittenden's son, said that his father had been "a 'broth of a boy,' with so much of the blood of his father, that he was ever ready for a hand to hand fight on the shortest notice." Chittenden Lyon had also inherited old Matthew's charm, and he was "universally popular and greatly beloved" among his neighbors. Chittenden Lyon continued his father's mercantile and farming interests and, also like his father, rode his popularity to a successful political career. He was elected to the Kentucky House of Representatives in 1822, and he went on to serve in the Kentucky Senate and three terms in the U.S. House of Represen-

tatives. When Lyon County was formed as Kentucky's 102nd in 1854, it was not named in honor of the old Jeffersonian Matthew Lyon; it was in honor of his son the Jacksonian, Chittenden Lyon.¹

Matthew Lyon Jr. was the fourth child and the second son of Matthew and Beulah Lyon. He was less flamboyant than his older brother "Chit," and less is known about him; a regrettable fact, for he became the father of the present subject, future General Hylan B. Lyon. While not as fond of the spotlight as his brother Chit, the record shows that Matthew Jr. possessed the Lyon talent for accomplishment. He was a captain in the local militia and served in the Kentucky Senate from 1834 to 1837, but he had less interest in a public life than his better-known brother. As Chittenden Lyon wrote to a friend, "My brother Matthew lives within two miles of my residence, (Eddyville, Ky.) and is doing very well—in fact, getting rich, for he minds the main chance and dabbles but little in politics."²

Nine-year-old Matthew Jr. had come to Eddyville with his father's colony in 1801 and, from the evidence, he became thoroughly absorbed with making a prosperous start on the Kentucky frontier. He was unusually slow to take a wife. It was not until 1821, when he was nearly thirty years old, that he married his fellow Vermonter, Elizabeth Maria Martin. The couple became the parents of eight children, but their marriage was brief. Matthew Lyon Jr. died in 1839 in Eddyville. The 1840 Federal Census shows that he did not leave his family destitute and reveals also that Matthew Jr. had not shared his parents' disapproval of slavery. The widow Elizabeth M. Lyon was the owner of eighteen slaves in addition to eight free white employees. The slave property of the Lyons placed them very near the top of the social pyramid, the planter class. Though they had suffered a grievous loss when Matthew died, they might still have survived had not Elizabeth Lyon followed him to the grave in 1844. The children were completely orphaned. Hylan B. Lyon was eight years old.

The parentless Lyon children went to live in the home of Frederick H. and Helen Skinner. Both Skinners were grandchildren of old Matthew Lyon, first cousins and, hence, also cousins to the orphans. F. H. Skinner kept a working man's hotel in Eddyville. His boarders included barkeeps, carpenters, grocers, brick masons, a constable, a telegrapher, and, now, his unfortunate young cousins. Skinner did not resent the unexpected burden. He proved to be a good guardian for the Lyon children and was their friend for life.

The extended Lyon family and their many enterprises made Eddyville a Lyon town, and the familiar faces and scenes of their surroundings must have eased, somewhat, the orphans' passage from grief to acceptance and from childhood to adolescence. Elizabeth Lyon Roe remembered Eddyville as an idyllic Southern town, "dotted all over with neat dwellings and good gardens, producing every variety of vegetables and flowers."³

However, the town was changing in a way that was not calculated to increase its charm. In 1849, the state repealed the law that forbade the importation of slaves. In Eddyville and the surrounding county, there was a resulting growth in the slave population, and there developed “a viable slave-based economy in need of more hands.”⁴

The slaves that came in under the new law were destined for the corn and tobacco fields, primarily, or for work in the nearby iron furnaces, and their owners looked ahead to a long future of profitable slave ownership, for the imported were very young. A quarter of them were in their mid-teens. Furthermore, Christopher Waldrep finds in examining the pertinent documents from the 1850s that the nature of slavery in Lyon County was changing. He says, “While most Lyon County slaves were female [indicating house servants], males made up seventy-three percent of the imported population. Lyon County masters sought labor.” If there was any redeeming aspect to this enthusiasm for importing slaves, it was found in the fact that Lyon Countians were not entering the deplorable business of slave breeding. Waldrep says that if they had been “breeding slaves for re-export South, they would have imported women and children at least as readily as men.” Neither were they becoming slave traders. The new state law prohibited the imported slaves from being re-sold within five years. Importers were required “to swear that their human chattels were for their personal use, not for resale.” Violators faced a \$600 fine, which was stiff enough to encourage a high degree of compliance.⁵

The Lyons took advantage of the 1849 law to augment their work force with imported slave labor. As a boy, Hylan B. Lyon saw that his surviving blood kin believed in owning slaves and were eager to own even more. It was a part of his early education, as integral to his understanding as the reading, writing, and the rule of three that he learned in the village schools. By age fourteen, he had acquired all he could from a rustic education, and his guardian arranged to send him to attend classes at the Masonic University in La Grange, Kentucky, near Louisville. His schooling at La Grange cost him \$12 per term for classes in mathematics, spelling, and Latin, and his books cost another \$1.08. The young scholar showed an aptitude for the written word; algebra gave him trouble. He heard the abolitionist Cassius M. Clay speak at La Grange, but he was not persuaded of the evils of slavery or convinced of the benefits of ending it.

After eighteen months, Lyon returned to Western Kentucky to attend Cumberland College at Princeton, only a few miles from Eddyville. His term there was brief. In 1852, at age sixteen, he won an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. He was admitted to the academy on July 1, 1852, one of a class of ninety-four cadets. They included future Civil War notables Orlando M. Poe, Fitzhugh Lee, and his fellow Kentuckian, William P. Sanders.

If Lyon had been pampered in Eddyville as a child of one of the community's elite families, he soon learned at West Point that there was nothing considered exceptional about him. The upperclassmen tormented the plebes, or freshmen, and "those plebes who were deviled most were the sons of wealthy or prominent men. . . . The rich and the poor came here from all sections of the country and of all classes and degrees of society; but after they reported, wealth, or knowledge, or family reputation counted for nothing."⁶

Cadets spent the months of July and August camping on the Plain. At the end of August, they moved into the Barracks, a new building in cadet Lyon's time (it was built in 1851); a four-story edifice of red sandstone "castellated and corniced . . . in the Elizabethan style." The cadets lived two to a room and the space was barely adequate. The rooms were a cramped fourteen by twenty-two feet, but they did feature a modern convenience previously unknown to many of the young men, a hot water heating system. A power plant in the basement kept the rooms comfortable in the coldest of New York winters.⁷

At least as prominent in the cadets' lives was the classroom building, built in 1839. Its three stories contained the chemistry department, including a laboratory; the fencing department, which included a gymnasium; the cabinet of minerals and fossils; the mineralogical recitation room; the geographical room; the engineering academy; the mathematical model room; the drawing academy; and the artillery model room. Upon examination of West Point's curriculum, Horace Mann, the great educator and head of the committee on instruction, had said, "The committee would express the opinion that when they consider the length of the course and the severity of the studies pursued at the academy, they have rarely, if ever, seen anything that equaled either the excellence of the teaching or the proficiency of the taught."⁸

The academic expectations were high, and many of those who enrolled with high hopes for a career as an officer in the U.S. Army found, to their surprise, that they had come poorly prepared for the challenge of West Point classwork. Of the ninety-four who enrolled as Fourth Classmen with Lyon, only forty-nine graduated. Beginning his classes, the cadet found that the minimum standard of scholarship expected of him included being able to "read and write well, and perform with facility and accuracy the various operations of the four ground rules of Arithmetic, of Reduction, of simple and compound Proportion, and of vulgar and decimal Fractions." The cadet was also expected to "write in a fair and legible hand, and without any material mistakes in spelling." Incoming students must demonstrate all of this, while, at the same time, trying to suppress the natural and nearly crippling homesickness suffered by so many and in addition to the daily drills that tested their physical stamina between mid-March and the beginning of November. Hylan B. Lyon measured up. At the end of his first year, he stood in about

the middle of his class, academically. He ranked forty-first in mathematics, forty-second in English studies, and twenty-third in French.⁹

In conduct, Lyon racked up a disappointing 126 demerits, which, from the available records, seem to be the most of his four years at the Academy. He improved as time went on, but at his best, he still fell far short of Superintendent Robert E. Lee, who had graduated in the class of 1829 without a single black mark against his name. Lee had assumed his duties as superintendent in September 1852, the same summer that Lyon came to West Point, and the dignified Virginian devoted himself to his work with high expectations of excellence from others, as well as from himself.

Lee felt that the “curriculum was overcrowded and some important subjects were being omitted” at the Academy. The reforms he recommended grew out of his experiences during the Mexican War, when he had the long opportunity to witness both the strengths and the shortcomings of a West Point education. Lyon may have been motivated to be more studious by the modern and more interesting classes that Lee instituted. They included Spanish, constitutional and international law, history, geography, and composition. The Kentucky cadet’s marks improved during his second year at the academy, and his demerits dropped by a third. If Lyon was inspired by Lee to aim higher, he was not alone. The superintendent was idolized by many. Future Union General John M. Schofield, who graduated in 1853, later said that Lee “was the personification of dignity, justice and kindness, and was respected and admired as the ideal of a commanding officer.”¹⁰

Lee took a personal interest in each cadet’s successes or failures. Douglas Southall Freeman writes, “When he could praise a boy’s work, Lee did not stint in his encomiums.” The superintendent would send letters of praise to the parents, complimenting them on raising such a fine son. Conversely, if it was obvious that the cadet was faltering, Lee would urge the parents to allow their boy to resign before examinations. To persist when failure was certain would only lead to unnecessary humiliation. There is no record of Lee ever sending either form of letter to Lyon’s guardians, and neither is there any record of Lee ever calling young Lyon into his office for a disciplinary talk. Lyon remained middling in both his grades and his deportment.¹¹

Lee left West Point in 1855 to accept an assignment as lieutenant colonel of the 2nd U.S. Cavalry, Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston, commanding. He was succeeded at the academy on April 1, 1855, by Major Jonathan G. Bernard, a colorless administrator whose tenure lasted only until the summer of 1856. Bernard was the superintendent during Lyon’s last year at West Point.

Lyon graduated on July 1, 1856. He ranked nineteenth among his forty-nine classmates. The best scholars among the graduates were assigned to the engineer corps. Lyon, now a brevet 2nd lieutenant, was assigned to the 2nd U.S.

Artillery, but in October, presumably after the traditional post-graduation visit home, he was reassigned to the 3rd Artillery. The assignment may have pleased him. He certainly had heard the stories handed down about his grandfather's service as one of the Revolution's first artillerymen, a claim based on his service as a gunner at Crown Point in 1775.

Lieutenant Lyon was ordered to report to Florida, where the 3rd Artillery was fighting in the Third Seminole War. He got only as far as New Orleans when his orders were countermanded, and he was ordered back to Fort Independence in the harbor of Boston, Massachusetts. He boarded a steamer from New Orleans to Boston, but upon reaching New York City he learned from a fellow officer that their respective companies of the 3rd Artillery were relieved from duty and were on their way from Florida. Consequently, he requested and received permission to wait on his company before proceeding to Boston. He waited for three weeks at Fort Columbus, Governors Island, New York, before learning that his company had been detained and would not come north until spring. He was ordered to remain in New York City until December 30, at which time he would turn about again and embark for Florida at the head of 294 recruits.

The United States had been fighting the Seminoles since 1817, when Andrew Jackson led excursions into West Florida in an attempt to capture runaway slaves who had found sanctuary with the tribe. The First Seminole War sputtered to an end in 1819, only to be resumed in 1835. The Second Seminole War ended in 1842 with the relocation of most of the Seminoles to a reservation west of the Mississippi. A few hundred fled deep into the Everglades and hid there under the leadership of Holata-Micco (Alligator Chief), who the whites called Billy Bowlegs.

In the next few years, there were intermittent clashes between the Seminoles and white settlers, and after each incident more soldiers were sent into the region to keep the peace. General David Twiggs was ordered to bring an end to these simmering hostilities. In January 1850, he was able to persuade a handful of Seminoles to relocate west of the Mississippi. The next month, they boarded a ship bound for New Orleans, and more Indians were said to be ready to accept General Twiggs's offer. Billy Bowlegs was not among them. He and his fellow resisters still roamed free in the swamps, and there they remained. Five more years of white efforts failed to force their surrender. Whites continued to push into Seminole land, occasional blood was shed, and the settlers demanded protection. Troops poured into the region.

In December 1855, Lieutenant George L. Hartsuff led an army surveying party of ten men and two wagons into the wilds south of Fort Myers. At Big Cypress Swamp, the Seminoles attacked them. Four whites were killed and five were wounded. The newspapers called it a massacre. War was declared

on the Seminoles, and General William S. Harney was sent to command the troops. Escalating violence led to more deaths on both sides, but the Indians had the advantage, initially, as guerrillas always do. Harney was not discouraged. He called on the War Department for more soldiers, augmented them with Florida volunteers, and conducted a campaign that combined water and land forces. Troops in canoes and skiffs scoured the swamps, driving the Indians before them, while dragoons, or mounted infantry, patrolled the edges to catch any Seminoles who emerged to escape. This campaign was underway when Lieutenant Lyon arrived from New York in early 1857.

Harney's campaign appeared to be succeeding, but it was exceedingly slow work. By late February, it was clear to Harney that the campaign was going to extend into summer. Floridians were becoming impatient with the progress of the general's campaign, and they clamored to join the fight. They promised "if the government will offer a reward for every live Indians [*sic*] with a proportionate less sum for the scalps of those who may be killed, that the 'Crackers' of that region will bring them in in sixty days."¹²

The army persisted through the summer and fall. On November 19, 1857, the Alligator Chief's lair was found and destroyed, along with his animals, stores, and crops in the field. The Seminole resisters had suffered a disaster, one that was repeated time and again as other villages were discovered. Winter was a starving time for the war-weary Indians, and it broke them. On March 27, 1858, Billy Bowlegs accepted the terms of surrender. The next day, the chief and his remaining followers boarded the steamer *Grey Cloud* for the passage to New Orleans, the first leg of their journey west. The Third Seminole War was over.

Lieutenant Lyon was not there to see the end. On March 1, 1857, he was ordered to Fort Yuma, California. Lyon was an observant traveler, and throughout his military career he wrote long, newsy letters to his family back in Kentucky to tell them about his adventures. In a letter to his cousin Laura O'Hara, written from San Diego on April 27, 1857, he described his circuitous trip west. He traveled by open yacht for four days to reach Tampa, a "miserable place," where he spent four days before going on to Pensacola. From there he took a stagecoach to Mobile, thence to New Orleans. He enjoyed four days in the Crescent City and then made the three-day voyage to Havana, Cuba. He considered Havana a very pretty city but he felt that it had not reached its potential under the Spanish. "In the hands of the Americans it would be in a short time the Queen city of the world," he said.¹³

From Havana, Lyon crossed the Western Caribbean to Aspinwall, Isthmus of Panama. He continued to the Pacific coast of the isthmus by rail and caught a ship for San Francisco. The voyage took thirteen days, with stops at Acapulco and Manzanilla. He told Laura that the trip north was a pleasant one. The ship

was not crowded and there were “a number of pretty and agreeable ladies on board, with one of whom, free as I am from all love affairs, I should most certainly have fallen in love had she not been a Spanish lady.” The young army officer and the señorita could not overcome the language barrier, and the budding romance faded. Lieutenant Lyon spent nearly a week in San Francisco (“the handsomest men and ugliest women of any city I have ever visited”), before traveling south to San Diego. There, he wrote his letter. The next day, April 28, he set out for the ten-day trip to Fort Yuma, his new assignment.¹⁴

Fort Yuma was an open compound of adobe buildings located at the mouth of the Gila River, at the place where it entered the Colorado. The outpost owed its existence to the gold rush of 1849. Gila Crossing became an important landmark for the gold seekers coming west on the California Trail. The Yuma Indians saw an opportunity in providing the prospectors an easy way to get across the river. They opened a ferry. After a while, a gang of whites launched a hostile takeover of the little enterprise, and they added a new, violent twist. More than a few emigrants were robbed and killed at the crossing by this homicidal gang. One night, when the usurpers were lying drunk in their camp, the Yumas crept back and killed all but three of them. The Yumas burned the bodies and quietly went back to running their ferry. The three survivors spread the word of the attack. A small militia unit was raised to punish the Indians. The brave volunteers marched out, only to be defeated in one encounter after another. Responding to the need for a better armed, more professional force to bring peace to the region, Major Samuel P. Heintzelman and three companies of the 2nd U.S. Infantry moved east from San Diego and established Fort Yuma on the California side of the Gila. The Yuma War lasted three years, 1850 to 1853. A treaty finally brought peace to the region, but the soldiers stayed on as an occupying force to protect travelers against Indians and renegade whites and to keep a cautious eye on Mexico.

Fort Yuma sat on a rocky hill, eighty feet above the rivers. Major Heintzelman wrote a long report in July 1853, describing conditions in his desert outpost. Away from the rivers, he said, the land was barren from lack of rainfall. In 1852, there had been only two inches of rain at Fort Yuma. The rivers were the essential life givers for the Indians and the soldiers alike. Fort Yuma's garrison was primarily supplied by ships from San Francisco that came up the Sea of Cortez (the Gulf of California) to the mouth of the Colorado and then fought the hard current up to the mouth of the Gila. Heintzelman pointed out that Fort Yuma was made possible as a permanent installation only after navigation on the Colorado became a reliable source of supply. Fort Yuma's other connection to the West Coast was the overland route from San Diego, 220 miles long and brutal in the best of times. It was by this desert trail that Lieutenant Lyon came to Fort Yuma in the spring of 1857.

Captain Henry S. Burton was the commander at Fort Yuma during the time that Lyon was posted there. Lyon's immediate superior was 1st Lieutenant Robert O. Tyler. He led Company A, 3rd U.S. Artillery, and was often assigned to escort arriving parties of soldiers across the desert. When Captain Burton was absent, Tyler commanded Fort Yuma. At those times, Lyon took temporary command of Company A, but his regular assignment was as post adjutant, which meant a great deal of paperwork, especially in dealing with Captain Burton's official correspondence.

Not long after Lyon assumed his duties there, a correspondent for the Washington, [DC] *Union* called Fort Yuma "the most important post in California." The roving reporter went on to say, "Two ferries have heretofore found active employment in crossing emigrants and cattle at the Colorado River. . . . They are now, by purchase at a large amount, merged into one. I have known the receipts of the Colorado Company to be upwards of \$2000 in one day." A stage line, the San Antonio and San Diego Stage Company, began service along the California Road in 1857, and when the company won the government contract to deliver mail from the east, Fort Yuma became more important than it had ever been. The resulting increase in travelers, the station manager and his crew, the blacksmiths and the wheelwrights, along with the local native population, the crews of the Gila River steamers, and the miners at the nearby mining operations who found their pleasures in the saloons and fleshpots of Arizona City (across the Gila from the fort)—all made Fort Yuma anything but lonely.¹⁵

Lyon rather liked it. The letter that he wrote home in mid-October was filled with interesting items. He told his cousin Laura O'Hara that it had taken him eight days to travel from San Diego to the fort, or, more accurately, four days and four nights, because the heat had been so fierce on four of those days that it was feasible only to travel at night. Now, in October, the weather was the "most pleasant I have experienced in a long time. It is something like Indian summer in Kentucky." The autumn mornings were sometimes foggy. The fort was on a hill, and the misty valleys gave one the impression of being "on an island in a vast sea." For daily amusement he had a pretty little dog with dark eyes and light brown spots. He called the dog "Dic" and went out with him frequently to hunt. Also, he told Miss O'Hara, there had been a recent dance. The ladies were Mexican, and a Mexican boy who played a comb covered by a sheet of paper provided the music. "We danced to our hearts content," Lieutenant Lyon said.¹⁶

However, despite the exotic desert scenery, his hunting excursions with Dic, and dancing with the Mexican girls, Lyon confessed to Laura that soldiering on the frontier could be monotonous; in fact, life was more monotonous "than it was at even West Point." He hoped that he might be transferred

back east, to a post in Virginia. There may have been yet another reason that he wanted to return closer to home.¹⁷

In this letter appeared the first hint that there was something deeper than simple friendship developing between Lieutenant Lyon and Laura O'Hara. He told her that if she did not want him to love her and pester her with love letters, she "must be careful how you address me as Dear Cousin." He said, "it would require but little encouragement for me to love, as I have never loved before, one whose beauty I admire and whose friendship I esteem so much as yours."¹⁸

Laura replied on December 8, "Cousin, I feel much flattered by the high compliments you have paid me, for which I feel myself so unworthy. You may have been jesting, but as you know I never flatter and believe everyone else to be equally serious. . . . You must not flatter me again for fear it will turn my head." She commented on the approaching Christmas season and assured him that his friends and loved ones would miss him. "I think you had better persuade Uncle Sam to send your regiment out here for our sake," she said.¹⁹

In the winter of 1857–1858, the 3rd U.S. Artillery was scattered all over the Department of the Pacific. The headquarters was at Benicia, California, and there was one company there. There was another company at the Presidio in San Francisco, one at San Diego, one at Fort Miller, California, and one at Fort Cascades, Washington Territory. There were two companies at Fort Umpqua, Oregon Territory, and there were three companies at Fort Yuma. The outliers were the one company at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas Territory, and the one at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, where Lyon hoped to be reassigned.

It was not to be. Despite Laura O'Hara's wishes that he be sent to the East and his own desires in that direction, Lyon would not leave the West for some time to come. Hostilities had broken out in Washington Territory. A campaign was planned against the Indians, and the 3rd U.S. Artillery was on its way to take part. It was in the Pacific Northwest that Lyon would become fully acquainted with what his West Point education had only hinted at and what his time in Florida and California had only fleetingly revealed. In Washington, Lyon would learn what it meant to be a soldier.

THE COEUR D'ALENE WAR

The situation in Washington Territory had been tense for some time. There were small incidents between the Indians and the settlers and prospectors whose numbers multiplied year by year. The government responded to the whites' complaints by increasing the army's presence in the region, which only aggravated the situation. Colonel George Wright commanded in the field, and he soon demonstrated that he believed less in diplomacy and more in intimidation. Soon after taking the field in March 1856, Colonel Wright captured and hanged eight Chinook tribesmen. Wright's show of force did not subdue the Indians. They vowed "that no white settlements should be made in their country, nor should there be any roads through it." The miners and the settlers were frightened.¹

In April 1858, forty Colville settlers signed a petition asking for army protection. They reported that two whites had been killed and some cattle had been stolen. Consequently, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Steptoe was dispatched from Fort Walla Walla at the head of a force numbering between 130 and 159 men. While accounts vary as to the exact number of men, they agree that the column was made up primarily of dragoons with two howitzer crews accompanying. At the Jesuit mission on the Coeur d'Alene River, Steptoe learned that the Indians were massing in his front. Father Peter Joset told Steptoe that the Indians were upset because they had learned that "the Government was fitting out an expedition to survey a military road from Fort Walla Walla to Fort Benton on the Missouri River, and that they would resist and prevent it."²

Steptoe decided to press on to the Spokane River. He found one thousand Spokans, Palouses, Coeur d'Alenes, and Yakimas waiting for him there. The brief skirmish that followed persuaded Steptoe that he could not fight his way across the river, and he decided to fall back to Walla Walla. On May 17, as the column retreated, the Indians attacked. Steptoe's soldiers kept moving, fighting off dashes against their supply wagons, until they reached Pine Creek.

The Indians were too many, and the soldiers could not cross. They dug in on a nearby hill. The soldiers' fire was accurate, but the Indians would not retire. The fighting continued through the day. Six soldiers were killed, eleven were wounded, the able bodied were exhausted, and those who could still fight were running critically low on ammunition. When full dark descended, Steptoe had the dead and his two howitzers buried, and the bluecoats slipped away. After a running skirmish of seventy-five miles, they reached Fort Walla Walla and reported the action that the press soon labeled as the Steptoe Massacre.

The Indians of the Northwest had the reputation of being "the most bold and warlike on the continent. Splendid specimens of physical humanity, they are skillful in the use of arms, and accustomed from childhood almost to live on horseback." Now these fearsome warriors had formed a confederacy, and they were emboldened by their victory over Steptoe. The campaign to regain their lands had begun. It was imperative that the army reassert its presence in the Northwest before conditions grew worse. Troops were summoned to the Columbia River from all over the Department of the Pacific. These included the companies of the 3rd U.S. Artillery from Fort Yuma.³

Lieutenant Lyon was ordered to report to San Bernardino, thence to San Francisco, and from there on June 13, 1858, he embarked for the Northwest aboard the steamer *Pacific*. A reporter for the New York *Herald* witnessed the departure. He wrote, "It was a lively scene at the wharf when the steamer sailed. The neat, soldierlike appearance of the troops from the Presidio; the bronzed, worn appearance of those who had crossed the desert from Fort Yuma, and the brilliant trappings of the officers, formed quite a contrast." The dispatch continued, "The steamer will leave these troops at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia river. Here they will remain for a few days to be fully fitted for the field, and then proceed to the fort at the Dalles. From there, they will march 200 miles across the Plains to Walla-Walla, where Colonel Steptoe is posted."⁴

The *Pacific* arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River on June 18. Captain Erasmus D. Keyes was in charge of the 3rd Artillery on board. By evening, Keyes and his men were at Fort Vancouver, "a picketed enclosure of about three hundred yards square, composed of roughly split pine logs." The buildings within the walled compound dated from the days of Dr. John McLoughlin and the Hudson Bay Company.⁵

On June 21, the artillerymen moved up the Columbia toward Fort Dalles. They arrived the next day and learned there, if they had not known before, that they were assigned to Colonel George Wright, who was leading one of the two punitive expeditions against the Indians for the Steptoe Massacre. Major Richard S. Garnett was going to lead the other punitive expedition



Ft. Vancouver, c. 1855. Library of Congress.

and march from Fort Simcoe to search for Indians further north. Lieutenant Lyon could have served comfortably under either Wright or Garnett. Garnett was a West Pointer and a Virginian, and Lyon shared his Southern sensibilities, but one can easily imagine that he thought himself lucky to have as his commander the more experienced Wright. Wright was fifty-five years old, a Vermonter by birth, and a West Point graduate, class of '22. He was a veteran of both the Second Seminole War in 1844 and the Mexican War. The brevet colonel was made full colonel in 1855. He recruited the 9th U.S. Infantry that same year and was ordered to Washington Territory. It was Colonel Wright who had hanged the eight Chinooks in 1856, an act that contributed to the further militancy of the Indians who defeated Steptoe in the so-called massacre, which, in turn, precipitated the punitive action that was now underway. In the spring of 1858, Wright built Fort Dalles on the site of an earlier camp, and it was from there that the 3rd Artillery marched as part of Wright's column on the afternoon of July 7, 1858.

The column made only six miles on the first day of the march, no great distance, but as Lieutenant Lawrence Kip of the 3rd Artillery explained in his campaign diary, "The length of each day's march will have to be regulated by the water, which in some places is not to be found for a distance of twenty miles. The country over which we passed during the afternoon is barren and desolate, unfit for culture." They camped at a place called Five Mile Creek.⁶

Marching some days as few as five miles and other days as much as twenty