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Captain Medorem Crawford's 1862 Military Escort Emigration Report

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BY KENNETH L. ALFORD

Captain Medorem Crawford's 1862 Military Escort Emigration Report



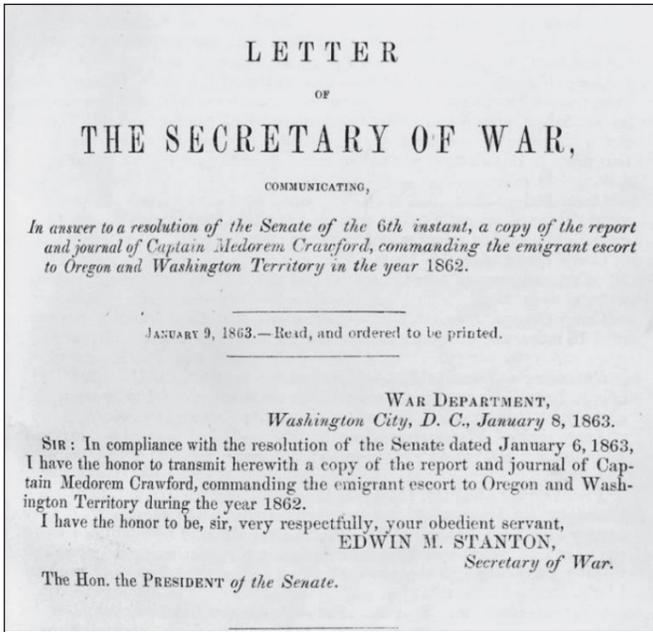
Introduction THE MENTION OF U.S. ARMY CAVALRY SERVICE DURING the American Civil War generally brings to mind images of the war's eastern theaters. Many soldiers, though, served with distinction on the western trails. Captain Medorem Crawford (1819–1891) was one of them.

Crawford, born in June 1819, left his native New York and immigrated to Oregon in 1842, as one of Oregon's early pioneers. He settled in the Willamette Valley, married,¹ and served several terms in the Provisional Legislature, which met while Oregon was waiting to receive territorial status. In 1861, as the Civil War began, Crawford traveled to visit his father in New York. While in the East, he was “taken into government service and made [an] assistant to Captain Maynadier, U.S.A., who commanded [an] emigrant escort” company. The following year, in 1862, he traveled east again, was promoted to captain and was ordered “to organize, arm and equip one hundred men” to assist and protect emigrants on the Oregon Trail.²

At the end of his 1862 escort duty on the trail, Captain Crawford sent a report, which follows, to Brigadier General Benjamin Alvord (U.S. Volunteers), who commanded the District of Oregon in the Department of the Pacific. His report illustrates how the Civil War changed overland travel as the federal government's role expanded, and it demonstrates that the war did not deter people from moving west. His report also confirms that some aspects of human nature are predictably constant—emigrants frequently tried to take too many possessions with them (and were forced to leave them along the trail), did not adequately provision themselves, relied too heavily on hearsay and faulty information, and quarreled with other emigrants. Crawford's report also comments on growing conflicts between Native Americans and emigrants that in some ways culminated a few months later, in January 1863, with the Bear River Massacre (near present-day Preston, Idaho).

¹ Medorem Crawford married Adalene Brown in 1843. Their first child, Medorem Jr., was “the first male child of American parentage born on the west side of the Willamette River.” Appointed to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1862, Medorem Jr. graduated in 1867 [Cullum No. 2202] and retired in 1908 as a brigadier general. See H. O. Lang, *History of the Willamette Valley* (Portland: Geo. H. Hines, 1885), 608; and *Register of Graduates and Former Cadets* (West Point, N.Y.: Association of Graduates, 1990), 290.

² Lang, *History of the Willamette Valley*, 608.



FAR LEFT The document cover and order to print Captain Crawford’s report on the U.S. Emigrant Escort Service, 1861–1864, authorized by Secretary of War Edwin N. Stanton. Captain Crawford commanded the Oregon Volunteers from 1862 to 1864. COURTESY OF IAN BRABNER, RARE BOOKS, MANUSCRIPTS, EPHEMERA, WILMINGTON, DELAWARE.

ABOVE Medorem Crawford (1819–1891). COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

OPPOSITE Military Post and City of Walla-Walla, 1862. Fort Walla Walla, Washington Territory, was established in 1856, and rebuilt three times. This finely rendered image of the third Fort Walla Walla, by landscape artist and engraver Gustav Solon, includes the fort and some of the town of Walla Walla. In June 1862 components of an Oregon volunteer force led by Capt. Medorem Crawford arrived and then disbanded at the fort. The volunteers had three-year enlistments, and upon completion of their service, they were to receive a \$100 bonus and 160 acres of land. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, FORT WALLA WALLA MUSEUM, WASHINGTON.

DOCUMENT

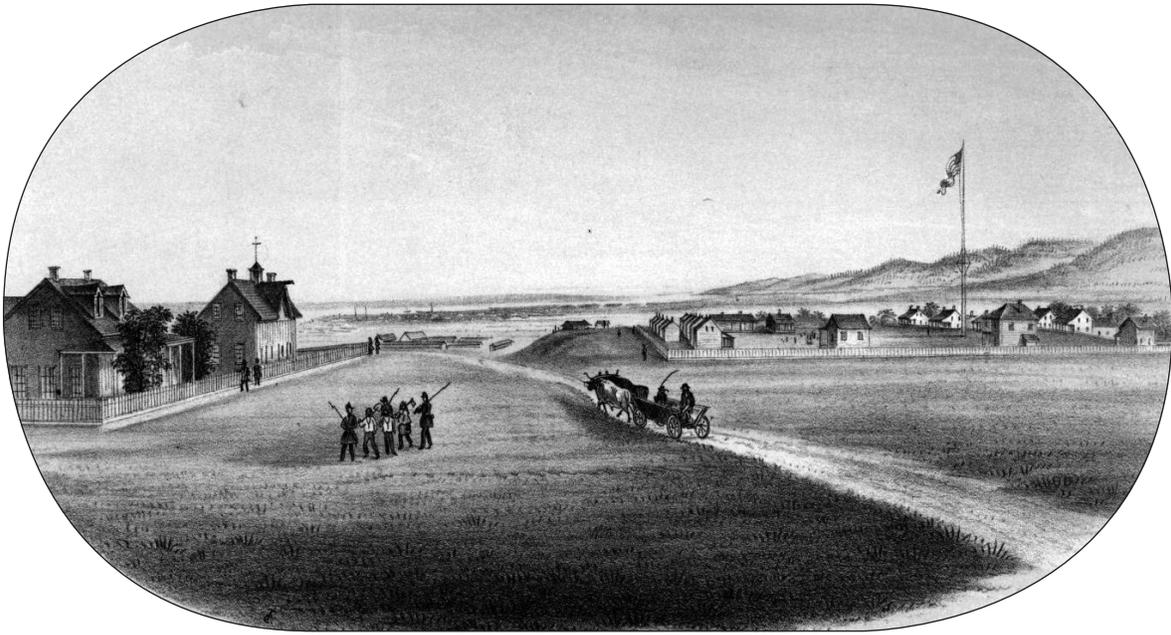
JUNE 16–OCTOBER 30, 1862.—
Emigrant road expedition from
Omaha, Nebr. Ter., to Portland, Oreg.
Report of Capt. Medorem Crawford,
U. S. Army, Assistant Quartermaster.

PORTLAND, OREG., *October 30, 1862.*

SIR: The duty of conducting an escort for the protection of emigrants to Oregon, &c., having been assigned me by the Secretary of War, and having performed that service, I deem it my duty, as it is certainly my pleasure, to comply with your request by reporting to you the principal incidents of my trip.

Having organized my company, procured my transportation and provisions, I left Omaha, Nebr. Ter., on the 16th of June. My company consisted of fifty mounted men, armed with rifles and revolvers, who were instructed in the duties of sentinels and drilled in the simpler evolutions of cavalry tactics. Our route lay on the north side of and immediately along the Platte River, up the Sweetwater, over the Lander road to near Fort Hall, and from thence on the south side of Snake River to Walla Walla. The movement westward was very large. Emigrants to Oregon, Washington Territory, California, Salt Lake, and Denver were on this road. Some had started in April, and were consequently

several hundred miles in advance of the rear portion of the emigration. Feeling it to be my duty to protect the rear, I did not hasten on the first part of the trip, but urged upon the emigrants whom I fell in with as I proceeded the necessity of husbanding the strength of their teams so as to be able to perform the journey over the barren deserts of Snake River, the necessity for which my last year’s experience had taught me. I soon found that a large proportion of the emigrants had started for the Salmon River mines under the very erroneous impression as to the locality of them. A guide of the route had been published and extensively circulated on the frontier, representing those mines as being within 180 miles of Fort Hall, not giving the locality of the road, but saying—good grass and plenty of water all the way. Under this impression many emigrants had overloaded their wagons and taxed their teams beyond their strength, and so positive were they that they could reach the mines without going down Snake River that many of them disregarded my counsel to dispense with comparatively useless articles with which they were encumbered. The result was that as soon as we left the Platte Valley and encountered the heavy sand and hills their teams and wagons began to fail. They then found it necessary to do what I had advised long before, dispense with heavy and useless articles, but unfortunately it was too late to save many of their teams. From this point to Powder



River article after article of furniture and wagon after wagon were left along, and scarcely a camp was left without some evidence of property abandoned. The large number of teams which were ahead of us had cut up the road to such an extent that the dust was very deep and its alkaline properties fatal to cattle. There were over forty head of dead cattle between the Owyhee and Malheur Rivers, a distance of sixteen miles, and we found the proportion nearly as great at other points along Snake River. The first evidence of Indian depredations we saw was a grave at the crossing of New Fork of Green River. From the inscription placed over it we learned that Patrick Moran, of Missouri, was killed by Indians on the 18th of July and two men wounded. We passed this place August 11, about three weeks after, at which time no Indians were to be seen. The next grave was on La Barge Creek, in the Bear River Mountains, on the head-board of which was the following:

Opened by Kavanagh's train on the 27th of July, 1862. The body of a man found too badly decayed for removal. One shot in the temple and an arrow shot. Supposed to have been killed by Indians.

On the 25th day of August we passed the graves of the following persons: One unknown man found by Captain Glenn's party August 13. He had been shot in the back of the head with

buckshot. Three miles farther there were five graves, side by side, of persons supposed to have been killed by Indians. Rufus C. Mitchell, N. Howie, James Steel, David Whitmer, and Frank Sessions were the names inscribed over them. This was in the vicinity of Fort Hall, and happened on the 9th of August, we passing on the 25th. We learned from the ferryman that while these five men were slain by the Indians twenty armed men from the same train stood upon a hill near by and made no attempt to rescue their comrades. There are strong reasons for believing that white men bore a part in this massacre. Between Fort Hall and Raft River we found four graves of men supposed to have been killed by Indians on the 9th of August. After crossing Raft River we found the grave of a Miss Adams, who was shot on the 9th and died on the 12th. We passed here August 31, twenty-two days after the fight. About the same time a Mr. Phillips left his train to go fishing, alone and unarmed, and was taken by Indians, and is supposed to have been killed. This happened near Goose Creek. It will be seen that the number killed, of which we have positive information, is about fifteen. No emigrants have at any time been troubled by Indians while in the vicinity of my company, but from the disposition shown toward the advance parties it is easy to see that the later and weaker parties would have been easily cut off had it not been for the protection afforded them by the Government. Near old

Fort Hall a ferry had been established, and many emigrants had crossed in pursuit of the mines. Some went to Fort Lemhi, others to the Deer Lodge Prairie, while others kept down the north side of Snake River and recrossed the stream at Boisé. From what was told me I am satisfied that many were induced to cross at Fort Hall by the representations of these ferrymen, which turned out unreliable. About twenty wagons which had crossed and met a returning party, were induced to recross and join those who were already under my escort. At this point I had 125 wagons of emigrants under my charge, and I found many of their teams so weak that they could not travel over ten miles per day, others being able to proceed faster; and in order to give protection to all, I divided my company, placing the advance party in charge of my principal assistant, Mr. Le Roy Crawford, while I remained with the rear and weaker party. From this point my journey was extremely slow. Many of the emigrants were short of provisions, which deficiency I had to supply. Others had difficulties among themselves which I was obliged to settle. The grass was very scarce, and their stock would scatter during the night, so that frequently my men would spend hours in looking after them in the morning. We cured their sick, fed their destitute, hunted, and in some instances drove their teams, mended their wagons, hauled their goods, settled their disputes, and kept them moving. Two men died and one was drowned in Snake River. With these exceptions every man, woman, and child that had traveled in my vicinity reached the settlements in safety. From the best information in my possession I estimate the emigration to Oregon and Washington this year at 10,000 souls, about two-fifths of whom I think crossed Snake River at the Fort Hall Ferry. From my own observation I am satisfied that a better road for emigrants may be found on the north side of Snake River than the one on the south side, but the precise point at which that river should be crossed I am not prepared to decide. I know there is a good road from near Salmon Falls to Boisé, having traveled down on that route in the year 1842, but as to the character of the country above that point on the north side, I have no reliable information. The recent discoveries of gold on Boisé River will doubtless attract large parties from the States next season, and a road on the north side will be very necessary. Should such be the case, and large numbers of emigrants with families flock to that country, I fear that unless some protection is furnished by the Government the Indians will make an indiscriminate slaughter,

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

MEDOREM CRAWFORD,
Captain and Assistant Quartermaster.
 Brigadier-General ALVORD,
U.S. Army.

SOURCE: *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 1, Volume 50, Part 1, pages 153–155.³

POSTSCRIPT

Captain Crawford’s unit disbanded at Walla Walla, in present-day Washington state, in October 1862. The following year (on February 10, 1863), General Alvord informed Headquarters, Department of the Pacific, that “It is expected Capt. Medorem Crawford, assistant quartermaster, will be ordered to return east to bring out another escort to emigrants”—which he subsequently completed.⁴ Besides the 1862 report (above), Medorem Crawford appears several additional times within *The War of the Rebellion* records.⁵

Following his final escort trail duty in 1863, Captain Crawford resigned his army commission. He lived the remainder of his life in Oregon, serving first as a “collector of internal revenue” and then as “appraiser of merchandise for the port of Portland.”⁶ In retirement, he was actively involved with the Oregon Pioneer Association, serving as its president from 1878 to 1881.⁷ Crawford died in Dayton, Oregon, the day after Christmas in 1891.⁸

Medorem Crawford’s papers (1.5 linear feet, primarily diaries and account books from 1842 to 1891) are housed at the University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives in Eugene, Oregon. 

3 This report is also published as record OR-105 in *Utah and the American Civil War*, Kenneth L. Alford, ed. (Norman, Okla.: Arthur H. Clark, 2017), 184–85.
 4 U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), Series 1, Volume 50, Part 2, 308–10.
 5 In the federally published *War of the Rebellion* records, Crawford appears in Series 1, Volume 50, Part 1 on pages 153–55, 156, 157, 167, 214, 219–21, 308–10, 953, and 956; he is also mentioned on pages 43, 154, 173, 309, 416, 429, 464, 631, 675, 746, 764, and 851 in Series 1, Volume 50, Part 2.
 6 Lang, *History of the Willamette Valley*, 608–609.
 7 Oregon Pioneer Association, *Transactions of the 40th Annual Reunion* (Portland: Chausse-Prudhomme Co. 1915), 559.
 8 Howard McKinley Corning, ed., *Dictionary of Oregon History* (Portland: Binford & Mort Publishing, 1989), 66.