A History of Fort Duchesne, Utah, and the Role of its First Commanding Officer, Frederick W. Benteen

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A History of Fort Duchesne, Utah, and the Role of Its First Commanding Officer, Frederick W. Benteen

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

by
Robert A. Huetter
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This thesis provides the first in-depth study of the problems that occurred during the initial garrisoning and construction of Fort Duchesne, in eastern Utah. The fort, situated about three miles above the junction of the Duchesne and Uinta Rivers and about midway between the two agency headquarters at Whiterocks and Ouray (see map, page 140), was plagued by a series of bad decisions from the very day the site was chosen. The source of these problems was the fort's first commander--Major Frederick W. Benteen. Benteen, a captain at the time, fought bravely and, with his men, managed to survive the dreadful Battle of the Little Big Horn. However, many historians and students of western history seem to be unaware that Major Benteen was Fort Duchesne's first commanding officer. It was his last assignment as an officer of the United States Cavalry. He was relieved of duty after only a few months at Fort Duchesne and later court-martialed.

This study also considers the history and background of three Ute tribes--the Uintah, the White River, and the Uncompahgre. They had been moved to eastern Utah
from western Colorado and the adjacent region of eastern Utah. The ongoing difficulties that forced the tribes' removal to the Duchesne area and the many problems that occurred once they were situated on the reservations are also examined in this thesis. It was determined that with three tribes located on two adjacent reservations, a fort would be needed to control the 3,500 Indians. Problems quickly arose since the new occupants of the Duchesne area resented any imposition of authority, particularly by "buffalo soldiers." In fact, the Indians, prodded by white men, were ready to fight to the death to keep the soldiers from entering their reservation. As the cavalry commanded by Benteen and the 21st U.S. Infantry under the command of Captain Duncan neared the future site of Fort Duchesne, additional difficulties arose that were to last for more than a year.² One account described the initial encounter as a full confrontation with the Indians, together in full battle dress and war paint, that lasted for three weeks while the soldiers awaited the arrival of two companies of black cavalry as reinforcements. The other account, by members of the 9th Cavalry, indicated that because of the mountainous terrain and the exhaustive march without water, the Indians could have killed every man without firing a shot had they so desired.³
Because of their importance during the early years of Fort Duchesne, this thesis includes a chapter on the 9th Cavalry, one of only two black regiments in the U.S. Army. After extended duty, first in the vast expanse of west Texas and then for more than two decades of continuous service on the Great Plains and in the mountains and deserts of New Mexico and Arizona, the well-traveled 9th Cavalry commanded by Frederick W. Benteen seemed more than equal to the demands of duty in Wyoming and Utah Territories.

Benteen formally assumed command of Fort Duchesne on 23 August 1886. His primary concern in the first days was to quell the potential Indian unrest, which he did without incident. It proved to be his only success, as the building process was a fiasco from the start. As winter neared and the troops were still housed in tents, Benteen became more and more depressed, choosing to spend most of his time at the post trader's store drinking liquor with his friends. Charges and countercharges were exchanged between Major Benteen and the post trader concerning the construction of the post. Relations became equally awkward between Benteen and his staff officers. The commander relieved several of his key people after they had served barely a month--implying that the post trader garnered
information from the young officers who were in his debt to outbid his rivals.5

Under pressure from Commanding General of the U.S. Army, Philip H. Sheridan, General George Crook, Commanding General of the Department of the Platte, finally decided to determine just what the actual problems were at Fort Duchesne. He sent inspector general Robert H. Hall to the fort to investigate and report. This thesis will examine this "infamous" report in detail, and explain how and why General Crook learned of the "seeming delay" in construction of the fort and other difficulties, including the conduct of its commander, Major Benteen. Several letters will be analyzed. One of these which appeared in the Kansas City Times on 3 January 1887, and purported to come from an unnamed enlisted man, has a familiar style. Apparently General Crook felt the letter was written by Benteen because just four days after the letter was published, Major Benteen was court-martialed.6

The few articles written on Fort Duchesne are little more than brief histories of the fort itself and do not concentrate on any individuals. But in its early stages, the establishment of Fort Duchesne was complicated by several powerful personalities. The conflict between them led to several major issues regarding the construction of the fort. The first issue centers on the question of
why a cavalry officer was selected to construct the fort. Major Benteen had spent the better part of his career, dating back to the Civil War, in the cavalry. He admitted that he was too old to learn any new tricks. Ironically, there were officers on his staff who found satisfaction in construction work of this kind.

The second major issue concerns General George Crook's attitude toward Major Benteen. Many historians and students of the Battle of the Little Big Horn believe that the main responsibility for the disaster at the Little Big Horn should have been shouldered by Crook. Perhaps the knowledge of this fact still disturbed both Benteen and Crook, with Crook regarding Benteen as a living reminder of his own failures. The opportunity to eliminate this reminder came in 1887. The question, then, is whether Benteen was railroaded by General Crook. Did Crook give Benteen this command knowing he probably would fail?

One entire chapter of this thesis is devoted to the military career of Major Benteen, including his service under the command of George Armstrong Custer in two major battles of the Indian Wars. Evidence will show that although Major Benteen had a brilliant record as a cavalry officer, commanding several companies of troops and a regiment of black troops, he was totally miscast as the commanding officer of a fort not yet constructed.
Two articles dealing with Fort Duchesne appeared in The Utah Historical Quarterly. The first, by Thomas G. Alexander and Leonard J. Arrington, examined Forts Cameron, Thornburgh, and Duchesne. The section on Fort Duchesne concentrated primarily on the fort's economic impact on pioneer Uintah County. The other article by Ronald G. Coleman emphasized on-duty and off-duty activities of the black soldiers during their years on the Uintah frontier. The article also is a brief history of the White River, Uncompahgre, and Uintah bands of Ute Indians.

Although there have been no lengthy books written on Fort Duchesne, there is an abundance of material available on the Indian War period (1865-1880s). In 1948, Edward Everette Dale's The Indians of the Southwest provided a history of the problems the Uintah Valley Agency faced on the Uintah Valley Reservation, including food shortages, cash shortages, medical shortages, and logistical problems associated with transporting rations enormous distances. Mostly Alkali, by Stephen P. Jocelyn, includes detailed information on the Meeker Massacre in September 1879. Captain Jocelyn's regiment had been ordered to the scene of the trouble, so Jocelyn had first-hand information on the agent's murder and his wife's capture and subsequent torture by the Indians. One of the most informative pieces of literature from this period is
Experiences of a Special Indian Agent, by E. E. White.¹¹ His diary has been transcribed into a valuable piece of history. It contains accounts of conversations between the Ute chiefs regarding the movement of General Crook to Fort Duchesne and the anxiety that it caused the Utes. White's book provided insight into the length to which Agent White had to go to induce the Indians to finally accept the approaching troops. Another interesting account by an actual participant in the movement of troops to Fort Duchesne is Henry Fiack's "Fort Duchesne's Beginnings."¹² This is essentially a brief recollection by an old soldier of events as the infantry neared the fort. The names, ranks, and dates in this account do not agree with other more reliable sources. However, it provides detailed information on the everyday life of a soldier in the U.S. Infantry.

One event in the Indian War period stands far above all others in terms of historical significance, in the amount of research conducted and the number of books written—The Battle of the Little Big Horn. Included in this abundance of literature are the letters of Major Frederick W. Benteen, in The Benteen-Goldin Letters on Custer and His Last Battle. Edited by John M. Carroll, these letters provide valuable data on Benteen's attitude toward Custer.¹³ They describe why Benteen hated the "boy
general" almost from the first day they met. In 1885, Randolph Keim wrote one of his finest works, *Sheridan's Troopers on the Borders: A Winter Campaign on the Plains*. This work explains the strategy that Custer used at the Battle of the Washita and other informative facts, such as weather conditions and enemy strengths. A useful addition to this detailed information is the overall picture in *Indian Fights and Fighters*, by Cyrus Townsend Brady, which portrays more general aspects of the Indian War battles, including both the Battles of Washita and the Little Big Horn. This book is one of the few definitive works on the career of the 7th Cavalry during the years before their final disaster.

Several of the more definitive volumes written on the Battle of the Little Big Horn have been referred to in this thesis. One of these works, *The Custer Fight: Captain F. W. Benteen's Story of the Battle of the Little Big Horn*, by E. A. Brinistool, is essentially a brief history of the famous battle as eye-witnessed by Benteen. It provided details of the revised plan of attack developed on the eve of the battle, which is similar to the successful plan used at the Battle of the Washita some eight years earlier. Colonel W. A. Graham wrote *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana* in response to the imperative need for a documented source book that would impartially
present original source material, much of if never before published, on Custer's last battle. He included actual conversations of key individuals in a battle situation.\textsuperscript{17} In 1976, Dr. Kenneth Hammer edited and prepared for publication \textit{Custer in '76: Walter Camp's Notes on the Custer Fight}. These notes are a series of painstaking interviews with almost 60 survivors of the 7th Cavalry and more than 150 Indian survivors of the Battle of the Little Big Horn.\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Camp Talk}, edited by John M. Carroll, consists of the very private letters Benteen wrote to his wife between 1871 and 1888. These letters reveal many minor details of life in a frontier army, and help the reader to understand the more general rigors, petty jealousies, and boredom of life on the early American frontier.\textsuperscript{19}

Not a great deal of literature is available concerning black soldiers in the post-Civil War years. However, several quality writings have been published in the past 20 years. One of these, "The Ninth Regiment of Cavalry," in \textit{The Army of the United States}, edited by Theodore F. Rodenbough and William J. Haskin, clarifies the scope and mission of the 9th Regiment.\textsuperscript{20} During their tour of duty in west Texas, the 9th Regiment was responsible for establishing law and order in the country along the Rio Grande. According to Rodenbough and Haskin, the 9th
Regiment helped pave the way for the western advance of civilization.

In 1979, John M. Carroll edited *Cavalry Scraps: The Writings of Frederick W. Benteen* which deals with the settlement of the Boomers in what is now Oklahoma.\(^{21}\) Benteen, who was called to command the 9th Cavalry at this time, was responsible for calming the Indians who were upset by the migration of Boomers to their lands. Shortly thereafter, the 9th was redeployed to Wyoming Territory. The author describes the movement from Henrietta, Texas, to Buffalo, Wyoming, in great detail. In 1879, Major Benteen returned to the battlefield on the Little Big Horn River. Statements Benteen made during this visit hint at the earlier problems between him and Custer.\(^{22}\)

Initial research indicated that a severe problem occurred during the initial construction phase of Fort Duchesne. What caused the long delay in building the fort? Historians have written extensively on various events or individuals that influenced the establishment of a new post --the Little Big Horn, George A. Custer, Major Frederick W. Benteen, General George Crook, and the 7th and 9th Cavalry units. However, no major work has connected these factors in order to explain what happened at Fort Duchesne during its first few months. This writer will analyze the role of each of these individual factors in the initial problems at
Fort Duchesne. By analyzing these factors, this thesis will construct an in-depth portrait of Major Frederick W. Benteen.
Notes, Chapter 1

1. Sal Lake Tribune, 27 August 1886. The name of the post was first reported as DuChesne, but reports later changed the name to Duchesne.

2. Atkins to Parsons, 8 April 1886, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record of Letters Sent by the Accounts Division, Vol. 75, 116-117. The term "buffalo soldier" is explained in Chapter 2, pages 27-28.

3. Kansas City Times, 3 January 1887.


5. Benteen, Court-Martial Transcript, Exhibit C.

6. Kansas City Times, 3 January 1887. Appendix A gives the full text of this anonymous letter.


21 John M. Carroll, ed., Cavalry Scraps: The Writings of Frederick W. Benteen (Bryan, Texas: Guidon Press, 1979). "Boomers" is a nickname given white intruders; these are discussed in Chapter 4, pages 77-80.

22 Graham, 143.
CHAPTER 2

ESTABLISHMENT OF FORT DUCHESNE

At the time Ulysses S. Grant was elected president in 1868, there was a single Indian reservation in Utah. The Uintah Valley Reservation of over two million acres was set aside by executive order in 1861, and established on a permanent basis by act of Congress on 5 May 1864. The Uintah Valley Agency was located on the reservation, which was so remote from any white settlements that it was very difficult to obtain supplies, or even for the agent to maintain contact with the world outside his own jurisdiction.

The reservation was large enough to furnish homes for all the Indians of Utah, but there were very definite reasons why no large number could be induced to remain there permanently. In fact, for many years the population of the reservation was only six or seven hundred, although at times other bands would come in and remain for a few weeks or months in order to receive rations or issues of goods. Unfortunately, appropriations by Congress were so meager that the agent seldom had much to give, even to
those residing there permanently. Consequently, the Indians were always short of food, and in order to avoid starvation, they frequently traveled long distances to hunt for game and such native products as the forests and mountains afforded. This interfered with farming, but a hungry people could not wait for crops to mature. In retrospect, it seems clear that most of Utah's Indian problems might have been solved by more generous appropriations of funds for the Uintah Valley Agency. If a boarding school, medical service, and sufficient money to provide food, clothing, farming implements, and livestock for every Indian willing to work had been provided, it may have been possible to concentrate almost all of the Indians of Utah under this agency.

There were many obstacles to such an extensive program and perhaps it is not surprising that neither Congress nor the Indian Bureau was inclined to undertake it. Transporting rations and goods such a distance involved great difficulty and enormous expense. The Indians were so remote from white settlements that it was difficult for them to market any surplus livestock, farm products, hand-made articles, or the furs and buckskins they took by hunting or trapping. Also, the lives of the six or seven agency employees were intensely lonely, and it is not surprising that few were willing to remain long. Another
factor was the continuing conflict with the LDS Church. As one researcher noted,

Agent Crichlow declared that officials of the Mormon Church deliberately sought to prevent a large concentration of Indians at the Uintah Agency by urging certain bands to remain where they were. This was facilitated, the agent said, by the leaders' jealousies and their unwillingness to risk loss of authority by bringing their people to a location where they might fall under the influence of some rival leader.

Before the end of Crichlow's term of service, many changes had occurred in the Indian situation in Utah. These changes, primarily the result of the Ute War in Colorado and its aftermath, resulted in the removal of most of the Utes of that state to Utah, some to a new reservation and the remainder to the Uintah Valley Reserve.

The removal of the New Mexico Utes to Colorado and the establishment of Los Pinos Agency was keenly resented by many citizens of Colorado. The Ute lands at that time extended over an enormous area, including much of the western part of the state. Far to the north of Los Pinos Agency was the White River Agency, while far to the south was the agency for the Southern Utes. Since miners and prospectors operating in that part of Colorado often trespassed upon the Indian reservation, and the Indians hunted both on and off the reservation, clashes between Indians and whites were not uncommon. Settlers and state
officials insisted that the Utes should be removed and their lands opened to settlement. (See map, page 135.)

In September 1879, the Utes on the White River Reservation in northwestern Colorado objected that the agent, Nathan Meeker, was plowing some of their land. Meeker continued to do so, however, and the Indians assaulted him, beating him badly and threatening his wife and daughter. Meeker, seeing that the temper of the Utes was on the verge of inducing them to take to the warpath, appealed for military aid.

Major Thomas T. Thornburgh, 4th Infantry, along with units of Captain Stephen Jocelyn's regiment and some cavalry, were ordered to proceed to the scene with three companies of cavalry and one of infantry. The Indians refused to allow his force of about one hundred men to approach the agency. Trouble started and Thornburgh was killed in Red Canyon, as were 12 others, while 43 soldiers were wounded. A later account described the ferocity of the Utes' attack:

Meeker and several employees were murdered shortly after the troops were reinforced and rescued at the agency itself. His wife, daughter, and Mrs. Price—wife of the agency farmer who had been killed—were taken captive, raped and treated as squaws. There was possibly one exception to this statement, of which the less said the better. Meeker was found naked, a chain around his neck, his skull bashed in, a bullet in his brain and a barrel stave thrust into his mouth, pointing to the heavens as another monument to unthinking savage cruelty.
The remainder of the force was able to withstand the Indians for six days, until General Wesley Merritt arrived with reinforcements.

These events outraged Colorado's settlers, who demanded both the White River Utes and the guiltless Uncompahgres, whose agency was at Los Pinos, be removed from their state. Only the Southern Utes, who had given no trouble, were allowed to retain their comparatively small reservation in Colorado. (See map, page 135.) On 15 June 1880, Congress ratified a treaty with the White River tribe, moving them to the Uintah Reservation.

The tribes received a $50,000 annuity for the cession of their rights in Colorado, but after the White River Indians paid an annual pension to the families of the massacre victims, their shares amounted to only $6 or $7 per person. In July 1886, the Uintah and Uncompahgre agencies were consolidated.4

As soon as the War Department learned that the Secretary of the Interior had ordered the removal of the two tribes to Utah, it arranged to establish a new post to protect the people living near the reservation and to make sure the Indians remained. Brigadier General George Crook of the Department of the Platte ordered troops from an encampment of the Uncompahgre in Colorado to establish a
post at the new agency, to be named in honor of the late Major Thomas T. Thornburgh.\(^5\)

As rapidly as possible, Crook began moving troops into the area and established a line of communications to the frontier post. Captain H. S. Hawkins of the 6th Infantry, with four companies, moved into the valley during August 1881 and set up camp near Ouray, near the junction of the Green and Duchesne Rivers. The Interior Department, fearing an adverse influence on the Indians from the troops, asked the Secretary of War to establish the new route some distance away from the reservation. As a result, Fort Thornburgh was built 35 miles from the agency and about 6.5 miles north of Vernal in the mouth of Ashley Creek Canyon. The military reservation itself eventually encompassed 21,851 acres, including Little Mountain to the north of the post which served as a pasture for the horses.\(^6\)

When the soldiers were moved to Ashley Fork, it soon became clear that local Mormons had squatters' rights to some of the land upon which the fort was to be established and were unwilling to relinquish them. Eventually it became impossible to secure a valid title to the land, and the War Department gave up on building the post. General O. O. Howard, who succeeded General Crook as department commander, reported in October 1883 that Major
E. G. Bush, then fort commander, was moving to Fort Douglas with his troops. The army anticipated no disturbances from the Indians during the winter, and believed that during the summer months, the roads which they built and repaired could transport all needed troops from the strengthened forts of Bridger and Douglas to answer a call.⁷ (See map, page 134.)

After the army abandoned the post on 22 July 1884, the squatters again took over and continued to hold the installation. Finally, in 1894, settlers received titles to the property they had occupied.

**A New Fort in Utah**

The immediate reason for establishing Fort Duchesne was to control the Uncompahgre Indians. There were reports that the Uncompahgres were shooting one another with disturbing regularity. Other accounts indicated that Indians wandered into Colorado, committed depredations, and got into trouble with the local citizens. In the long run, the government intended to move the Southern Utes out of Colorado to the northern reservation, thus grouping the entire Ute family of Indians together. With 3,500 Indians on the reservation, a government fort would be necessary to provide some display of authority. A third possible objective in establishing Fort Duchesne,
and another possible reason for the discontent at both reservations, became apparent when the Bureau of Indian Affairs changed agents at the reservation. The new agent reported that his predecessor had been so afraid of an outbreak that instead of subtracting the amounts for the Meeker Massacre from the portion of the White River Indians, he had subtracted it from the total money paid to all three tribes. This meant that, in effect, the Uncompahgres and Uintahs had to help pay for the White River Indians' misdeeds. The bureau sent an examiner to investigate, and after receiving his report, Commissioner J. D. C. Atkins recommended the establishment of a fort near the reservation. 8

At the instigation of the Department of the Interior, the War Department sent an investigating officer to the Uintah and Ouray agencies to inquire into the problems. He reported it would be desirable to establish a new fort near the two agencies to control the Indians. After taking the report under consideration, the War Department ordered Brigadier General George Crook, who had returned to the Department of the Platte, to select a site convenient to both agencies. The event was reported in a Utah newspaper:

Colonel T. H. Stanton, U.S.A., returned last evening from General Crook's expedition into the Ute country, eastern Utah. A military post called Fort
Duchesne was established on the Uinta River, two miles and a half above its junction with the Duchesne, and about midway between the Uintah and Ouray agencies, being about twelve miles from each. The new post is about 130 miles from Carter Station on the Union Pacific Railroad, and 80 miles from Price's station on the Denver and Rio Grande.

In mid-August, Special Indian Agent Eugene E. White, of Arkansas, called the Uintah and White River chiefs together and told them about the planned fort. The two tribes were immediately disturbed by the information, whereas the Uncompahgres, the main culprits in the area's recent troubles, went on about their business as usual.

In an interview with the Salt Lake Tribune, Post Trader Barbeit of the Uintah Agency stated that the Indians were greatly excited over the coming of the troops and that the Uintah and White River Indians were, in fact, so stirred up that the 30 white people had made arrangements to rendezvous and fight to the death in case of an outbreak.10

Because of the growing restlessness and discontent among some of the young braves of the Uintah band, and the increasing danger to Agent White and his employees at the agency, White was about to ask the White River chiefs to come in and explain the discontent at the reservation when Big Tom, Antano, Tokawana, and two or three other Uintah chiefs voluntarily appeared at the office and gave him that information themselves.11 Big Tom's speech included
approximately all that was said by the chiefs, and was interpreted to Agent White in substance as follows:

Two sleeps ago, two white men came to Sonawick's [White River Chief] camp in the dark and told him that the big soldier chief, General Crook, was coming with a big band of soldiers to kill some of the Uncompahgre, White River and Uintah chiefs, and put the others in the big guardhouse [penitentiary] and give our reservation to the white man. They said the soldiers would be here in ten sleeps; that they saw them getting off the cars at Evanston themselves, and talked with them. These white men said they were our friends and had hurried back to tell us. They said we ought to go and drive off all the white people, and take all the beef and flour, and everything else, at Uintah and Ouray, and then go and meet the soldiers in the canyons and fight them.

The young men of the Uncompahgre and White River bands are heap mad. Heap bad talk--talk about fight.

The chiefs counseled peace until last night. Last night they gave their consent, and now their squaws and papooses are running to the mountains, and the warriers are getting ready to fight. Maybe so fight today, maybe so tomorrow. Don't know.

Agent White had no doubt of the sincerity of Big Tom's attempt to avert trouble and to maintain peace among the tribes. Moreover, his speech had confirmed White's suspicions that the Indians were being "prodded" to fight by white men. Shortly after dark, Big Tom and his followers returned to tell Agent White that the White River Indians were ready to fight, but had promised to wait and hear what he had to say.

At eight o'clock the next morning, the Indians came in to counsel. The Uintah chiefs looked even more
careworn and anxious than they had the previous evening. Many of the young men who came with the White River tribe were heavily armed, looking dark and sullen.

Among the White River Indians, pistols could be seen protruding from the folds of nearly every blanket. Every belt was full of cartridges, and a Winchester rifle was slung to every saddle. Somawick, the principal chief, had two large revolvers buckled on the outside of his blanket. They left all their ponies grouped together, and a large number of braves remained with them and did not come into the council house at all—a most unusual circumstance.¹³

Agent White spoke with determination and urgency. He spoke of the surrounding country—the loveliest valley in Utah, with beautiful running waters that were cold and good in the hot summertime from the melting snows in the mountains; rich grass in the valleys for the Indian ponies; deer and elk in the mountains for meat and buckskin; mountains all around for shelter from the cold winds in the winter. He reminded the two tribes that Washington had no intention of taking the lands away from the Indians.

White men have told you that Washington is sending these soldiers to take your country away from you and give it to the white man. This is not the truth. The men who tell you that want the country themselves. They see but one way to get it, and that is
to blind your eyes with talk, and get you to sack the agencies or fight the soldiers, or do some other great wrong, that would cause Washington to take your country away from you and drive you off somewhere else as punishment. Then these men being right here on the line, they could come in and take this beautiful valley of yours before the white men who live a long way off could get here. You think these men are your friends. I have no doubt they are in a great many things. But they covet your reservation.  

The Indian agent told the chiefs of the two tribes to go back to their homes and bring the women and children back from the mountains. He promised that if any white man came on the reservation, they would quickly be placed in the guardhouse. The Uintah chief, Big Tom, and Sowawick, the White River chief, appeared to believe White's words, but warned that Saponero, the Uncompahgre chief, should quickly be told because his tribe was still considering going on the warpath.

It was twelve o'clock and I announced that I would go to Ouray in the afternoon to hold council with the Uncompahgres. The chiefs all said they were glad of that and hoped Henry Jim [Saponero's young son who attended the council] would get there before anything bad had taken place. Sowawick shook hands with me and pledged me his word that no harm should be done by the Indians in my absence.

Garrisoning the Fort

Word of the War Department report and the selection of a site for a new fort was sent to Major Frederick W. Benteen, who then began moving south from Fort McKinney at Buffalo, Wyoming, with troops B and E of the 9th
Cavalry which he commanded. He left on 20 August 1886, and marched more than 200 miles south to Rock Creek (near Rawlins, Wyoming) on the Union Pacific Railroad in south-eastern Wyoming. From there, they went by train to Carter, near old Fort Bridger, then took up the march again southbound to their destination in Ashley Valley. (See map, page 135.)

At the same time, Companies C, F, I, and K of the 21st U.S. Infantry under command of Captain Duncan were ordered from Fort Steele, 20 miles east of Rawlins, to head for the same Utah destination by the same route. (See map, page 135.) Henry Fiack, who was attached to one of the companies, gave a graphic description of the march to Fort Duchesne:

We were stationed at Fort Fred Steele, Wyoming, at a point where the Union Pacific Railroad crosses the North Platte River. The latter part of July, or early in August 1887 [1886], at nine o'clock p.m., our senior captain in command, Captain Duncan, received orders from the War Department to abandon Fort Steele and proceed by special train and in all haste to Fort Bridger, and receive further orders from him, as to our destination.

At eleven o'clock that same night, we were on board of a special train under heavy marching order, and started for Carter Station, Wyoming, and from there marched eleven miles to Fort Bridger, Wyoming.

General Crook arrived in due time at Fort Bridger, handed our commander, Captain Duncan, a package of sealed orders, directed us to follow the road by way of Fort Thornburgh and the old Ashley, until we arrived on the banks of the Uinta River, there open our sealed orders and await his coming, which we did.
Meanwhile, at the Uncompahgre Reservation, Special Agent Eugene E. White was just completing his council with Saponero, chief of the tribe, concerning the coming of the cavalry, when he noticed five Indians riding their ponies fast from the Uintah Reservation. As they drew near, he saw that they had been riding hard and were very excited. The leader was an old man named Sour. He did not wait to get nearer than a hundred yards when he began shouting:

Buffalo soldiers! Buffalo soldiers! Coming. Maybe so tomorrow. Indians saw them at Burnt Fort [sic] yesterday, coming this way. Don't let them come! We can't stand it! It's bad—very bad! 17

The old Indian was talking so fast that the interpreter had a hard time understanding and explaining the problem to the Special Agent. Finally, the interpreter explained that old Sour was saying:

You did not tell us that "buffalo soldiers" were coming and we did not agree for them to come. We did not think about them at all. Our agreement applies only to white soldiers. That is all right. We told you they might come, and they may. But all the Indians want you to come back quick and meet the "buffalo soldiers" at the line and send them back. We cannot stand for them to come on our reservation. It is too bad! 18

Agent White asked why the Indians objected to black troops, or "buffalo soldiers." The old Indian became even more excited and leaping from his pony, spoke in broken English:
All over black! All over black, "buffalo soldiers!" Injun heap no like him! Wooly head! Wooly head! All same as buffalo! What you call him, black white man? Nigger! Nigger!

Finally, after being assured that all the soldiers' chiefs were white men and the pledge of White's word for the good conduct of the "buffaloes," Sour agreed that they might come and gave his word he would hurry back and satisfy all the Indians.

There were two conflicting reports of the events that occurred as both the cavalry from Fort McKinney and the infantry from Fort Steele neared the site of Fort Duchesne. Fiack noted:

We took regular traveled road, marched about thirty miles without water or anything to eat, arrived on the banks of the Uinta River about four o'clock p.m. and so did General Crook in an army ambulance, and confronted about 700 Indians, Ute and Ouray, in full war dress and paint, and hostile, as hostile can be. Our first act was to throw out a picket line and the remainder of our tiny command started to dig in, or in other words, to dig trenches, a task we accomplished in a surprisingly short time. We stayed in the trenches for three weeks, short on ammunition and provisions, put on a bold front, displayed our triangle shaped bayonets to the best advantages, and succeeded in bluffing the Indians, until the welcome approach of re-enforcements in the shape of two companies of colored cavalry from Fort Washakie [Fort McKinney] under the command of Lieutenant Colonel [Major] Benteen.

The other report came from a discharged member of the 9th Cavalry belonging to one of the troops stationed at Fort Duchesne. While in conversation with him, a Kansas City Times correspondent, who noticed that he was
an intelligent man, proceeded to ask him for information about the affairs in Fort Duchesne.

The companies of the 21st Infantry from Fort Sidney [Fort Steele] had started three days ahead of us, and we were told we must overtake them, and this over a mountain trail where infantry can make better time than cavalry.

One day orders were received from the department commanded to divide the cavalry and send one ahead faster, as trouble was expected. Had there been trouble with the Indians, there would not have been a man left to tell the story. The department commander pushed ahead rapidly in his ambulance, overtaking the infantry and making them march 50 miles to the last day into Duchesne, 32 of it without water. These troops were so exhausted when camp was reached that had there been an attack, the Indians would have killed every man of them without firing a shot. One day behind the infantry came one cavalry company and this over a mountain road and through canyons where these small detachments could have been literally eaten up by the Indians had they so chosen. Indians and citizens laughed at such a march and asked us if we had lost our senses.

The second account appears to have more credibility. However, there is evidence that it was not told to the reporter by a discharged trooper of the 9th Cavalry, but by Major Benteen. Only four days after the article appeared, a court-martial board was ordered to convene with Benteen as the accused. Why Benteen, if he was not responsible for the article? These questions will be answered in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, even if Benteen was responsible for the article, it was probably accurate.

Major Benteen reached the site with Troops B and E in record time on 23 August 1886. The 21st Infantry
companies probably arrived about the same time, and Fort Duchesne became a new landmark in Utah. The command established itself in tents while awaiting quartermaster supplies and lumber to build the post. In true ironic Army fashion, some of the first wagons arrived with nothing but lampposts, a commodity which might have arrived more appropriately a year or two later. Such disorganization, along with the bleakness of the place, caused the fort to be dubbed "Fort Damn Shame."

But if the garrison couldn't be supplied, we had something to laugh at. The first teams that arrived had only shelter tent poles, an article that is never used. The next teams brought street lamps. Then came a train loaded with doors and window frames, but not a nail, a pick or axes or helve, and we were compelled to wait for these things for months. Good mules were sent us, but not a shoe had the post quartermaster able to get for them. He had done the best he could, but had to work them day and night till the feet of some of them were worn to the quick and liable to die from that cause alone. When I left, the blacksmiths were at work cutting up wagon tires and iron bunks to get iron to make shoes to save the mules. Their horses are barefoot and unable to take the field at all. Not a veterinary instrument or pound of medicine has been received at the post.

By October 1886, reports from the post indicated there would be no immediate trouble from the Indians, and the soldiers settled down to the usual camp duties and the challenges of establishing their post on a permanent basis. After their initial establishment, the War Department found no further use for Forts Steele and Bridger.
Fort Steele, the smaller of the two posts, was abandoned immediately after the troops left for the Uintah country, and Fort Bridger suffered the same fate in 1890. The army designated Fort Duchesne to guard the Indian frontier in eastern Utah, western Colorado, and southwestern Wyoming.

Construction of the Fort

Adobe was the primary construction material for most buildings at Fort Duchesne, but lumber ultimately was used to cover them. The buildings at Fort Thornburgh were torn down and the lumber moved to the site of the new post, where it was used for the stables and outbuildings. The barracks and officers' quarters were made of new lumber and painted gray. The first troops who arrived at Fort Duchesne spent most of their time hauling logs and building barracks, officers' quarters, a commissary, a storehouse, and a hospital at a total cost of $22,800.24

In July 1887, General Crook, together with Major George D. Dandy, chief quartermaster, and Colonel T. H. Stanton, the army paymaster, toured the newly constructed post. General Crook reported that the buildings were not all he hoped for, but they were all that would be built owing to the shortage of funds and the late season.25 The buildings of the post were erected as follows:
Except for commanding officers' residence, officers' quarters were duplexes that measured 32 feet across front of building and 56 feet in depth. Six barracks each were 120 by 30 feet in main section, with wing that was 70 by 30 feet. Top two on each side of parade were for infantry, lower ones were for cavalry. Hospital apparently was group of three buildings—ward, surgery, and steward's quarters, or office. Amusement hall and administration building at south side of parade—top of plat is north—was 120 by 32 feet, while building used temporarily in 1888 as headquarters measured 70 by 16 feet. Parade ground was 653 feet wide and 900 feet long, not counting arc at officers' row. Corral, wood enclosure measured 466 by 300 feet. As late as 1924, the buildings constructed in 1886 were still standing, and used by the residents of the surrounding area.

One side of the circle is the agent's house and the officers' quarters. Extending from this are the barracks. Opposite to the agent's house are the offices; but they see a different service from that they first knew. The agent's house is still occupied, as most of the work of the reservation is attended to here. The agent handles all the money that is paid to the Indians by the government or by lessees. There has been quite an unequal fate for the barracks; in one, church is held; in another, the fire apparatus is kept; and still another, a garage is established. To the west of the parade grounds is the drill field.

Fort Duchesne, finally completed in 1887, had a multiplicity of problems before completion, primarily due to its first commanding officer, Major Frederick W. Benteen.
Notes, Chapter 2

1 Dale, 136.
2 Jocelyn, 305.
3 Ibid.
4 Dale, 137.
5 Alexander and Arrington, 340.
6 Ibid., 341.
7 Ibid., 342.
8 Atkins to Parsons, 116-117.
9 Salt Lake Tribune, 27 August 1886. (See map, page 135.)
10 Salt Lake Tribune, 12 September 1886.
11 White, 122.
12 Ibid., 125-126.
13 Ibid., 132.
14 Ibid., 138.
15 Ibid., 142-143.
16 Fiack, 31.
17 White, 147.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 148.
20 Fiack, 32. (See map, page 135.)
21Kansas City Times, 3 January 1887. The full text of the article is in Appendix A.

22Jocelyn, 308.

23Kansas City Times, 3 January 1887.

24Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: LDS Church Historical Department, 16 February 1924), 16 February 1924.

25Alexander and Arrington, 345.

26Herbert M. Hart, Old Forts of the West (Seattle: Superior Publishing Co., 1965), 134.

27Journal History.
CHAPTER 3

THE COMMANDING OFFICER--FORT DUCHESNE, UTAH

On Wednesday, 22 June 1898, shortly before one o'clock in the afternoon, Frederick William Benteen died in Atlanta, Georgia. His funeral at St. Philip's Church on 25 June 1898 was well attended. The Reverend Albion W. Knight conducted the services, which commenced at four o'clock. Honorary pallbearers included Georgia Governor William Y. Atkinson, Atlanta Mayor Charles P. Collier, Captain Charles S. Arnall, Judge John S. Candler, Dr. Amos Fox, Judge Lowndes Calhoun, Donald M. Bain, Joseph Jacobs, Robert Schmidt, Colonel Sam W. Wilkes, and Benteen's closest friend, Joseph Nash. In November 1902, Benteen's body was moved to Arlington National Cemetery.

Who was this man--this soldier who fought in the Civil War, the Indian Wars, and became the first commanding officer of a lonely army post in Utah? Who was this hero who commanded governors and mayors as pallbearers at his funeral? According to military records, Frederick William Benteen entered the army as a first lieutenant on 1 September 1861. His first taste of battle, however, and
the first significant conflict of the Civil War in Missouri was the battle of Wilson's Creek on 10 August 1861. His exact status there has been obscured. He was not an officer until 1 September 1861; however, he apparently was not an enlisted man either. Much later he claimed that he went to Wilson Creek as a "sight seer," but this turned out to be somewhat misleading, and was finally contradicted by his own admission that he had been "setting up" (training) Union volunteers for some time prior to the battle.¹

Frederick Benteen was a native son of the Old Dominion, born at Petersburg, Virginia, in August 1834. He was educated at the Military Institute in the town; when he was about 15 he moved with his parents to Missouri. For the next 12 years he lived in St. Louis, but what he did for a living was concealed even from the board which examined him for regular commission after the Civil War. Apparently, he was still living with his family in 1861 and his reluctance to hurry and enlist that same spring--though he was a strong Union man--would be understandable if he was in some way working for his father, Theodore, or for a family business.

His decision to accompany Union troops precipitated a family crisis. Because of this, Benteen refused many offers of a commission from the infantry companies.
for which he drilled in the summer.\textsuperscript{3} His father, a strong secessionist, was quite vehement on the subject of Benteen's siding with the Union faction. When Benteen informed his family that he was going with the Union Army, his father told him, "I hope the first goddamned bullet gets you."\textsuperscript{4} Benteen apparently ignored his father and was influenced more by his current girlfriend, who brought pressure on him to support the Union.

Benteen served the North with considerable distinction. A complete list of skirmishes, full-scale engagements, sieges, raids, and captures in which he participated would require many chapters in his biography. A few of the more significant ones are included in an attempt to determine the military personality and ability of Benteen as a newly enlisted officer. His first taste of action on 13 October 1861 was at a little field called Dutch Hollow near the present-day town of Wet Claize, close to the geographical center of the state of Missouri. (See map, page 131.) It was only a minor skirmish, which sent the Confederates into retreat. Later, at Pea Ridge, Arkansas,

\textldots Benteen withstood three separate and fierce charges from the whole of General McIntosh's Indian Brigade, and by holding the rebels in check sufficient time was given Brigadier General Eugene A. Carr to change his front and form his brigade in the rear of Elk Horn Tavern, and save the day at that point, and had that point been lost, the battle had been lost.\textsuperscript{5}
On 7 July 1863 at Iuka, Mississippi (see map, page 131), Benteen was involved in a relatively minor cavalry engagement which, in the words of Lieutenant Jennings, was "the hottest this regiment has ever been engaged in." 6 When the return fire got so hot that the gunners could no longer face it, Colonel Cornyn ordered Major Benteen to storm the hill. Benteen led the 10th Cavalry up the hill in the face of a withering fire that Cornyn described as a "tremendous and destructive volley of musketry, as severe, for the time it lasted, as any I have ever had the fortune to witness." 7 For the first time in his career he received a commendation that singled him out. It would not be the last time. "Major F. W. Benteen, commanding the 10th Missouri Cavalry, was where a leader should be, in the front, and, by his coolness and great tact and skill, did much toward gaining the day." 8

At Canton, Mississippi, commanding officer Colonel Edward F. Winslow suddenly fell ill and was excused by General William T. Sherman. Winslow headed back to Vicksburg, leaving command of the brigade in the hands of Major Benteen. On 27 February 1864 his brigade started back for Vicksburg in the rear of General James McPherson's XVII Corps. Almost at once the rear was assailed by three brigades of Confederate cavalry, believed to be men from Nathan Bedford Forrest's
command. Under Benteen's leadership, the brigade deployed and drove the Confederates back. McPherson, alarmed at the commotion in the rear, hurried back. By the time he arrived, Benteen's men had put the rebels to flight. McPherson was delighted. "Splendid, Benteen!" he boomed, patting the gallant major on the back in the presence of other officers. "You never get sick and I always know where to find you!"

Benteen's last significant action of the war occurred on 31 March 1865 near Montevallo, Alabama. "At sunrise, the 10th Missouri Cavalry was in the saddle and by itself underway, on a mission of destruction." About five miles south of the town, near the hamlet of Brierfield, Benteen, with a portion of his regiment, captured the Bibb Naval Furnace iron works and held it against a superior force of Brigadier General Philip D. Roddey's Confederates sent there expressly to defend it. Benteen considered this "the boldest act of his life." Others agreed it was audacious under the circumstances. Hinricks reported:

Had we but known our situation at the time, we might have wished ourselves away from there, for our whole command did not number over 300 men and it was divided into two squadrons several miles distant, in order to destroy the works. And yet the enemy had between 6 and 7,000 there and allowed us without opposition to destroy a million and 1/2 worth of property."
When the war ended, Benteen was promoted to full colonel and given command of one of the newly created volunteer units. The regiment that he was given was created from the black followers of Wilson's Cavalry Corps in its march through Alabama and Georgia. They were designated the 138th USCT (United States Colored Troops). They were to garrison Atlanta.

Benteen was not exactly enamored of black soldiers. While it would be a gross misstatement to assert that he despised them, he held them in low esteem. His attitude was typical of officers of his times and circumstances. The use of black troops was still largely experimental. Furthermore, Benteen was a Southerner by upbringing and had been associated with black slaves and servants since his infancy. He certainly did not regard them as equals. He had not regarded the Civil War as a crusade to free the slaves, but rather as a struggle to preserve the Union and cause his "deluded kinsmen to see the error of their ways."13

Naturally, black troops were not much appreciated in Atlanta. The officers who commanded them were regarded as little more than carpetbaggers. But aside from the inevitable resentment, there were no ugly incidents, and the USCT's tour of duty in Atlanta was generally peaceful.
On 6 January 1866, the 138th USCT was disbanded (along with most of the volunteer regiments at that time) and Benteen became a civilian once again. On 24 November 1866 Benteen wrote to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, accepting a captain's commission in the newly formed 7th Cavalry. He was ordered by the adjutant general's office to report for duty with his new regiment--at Fort Riley, Kansas. He would remain with the 7th Cavalry for the next 16 years.

The post commander at Fort Riley (and lieutenant colonel of the 7th Cavalry), George Armstrong Custer, had never seen or heard of Benteen. For that matter, Benteen had never seen Custer before, though he could not help but have heard of the boy general. On 30 January 1867 at Custer's quarters in Fort Riley, Benteen paid the customary courtesy call and met for the first time the man who would become his nemesis. Benteen was disgusted by Custer's pretensions and he later gave a salty description of his introduction to the golden-haired general. Custer spent the entire meeting proclaiming his own prowess in military ways, after which Benteen left. Benteen concluded that "the impression made on me ... was not favorable. I had been on intimate personal relations with many great generals and had heard of no such bragging as was stuffed into me that night."
From that moment on, the military lives of these two decorated Civil War officers were interwoven right up to the Battle of the Little Big Horn 10 years later. Benteen, older, more experienced, and possibly as well thought of by his peers as the flamboyant Custer, had all the skills necessary to maintain his credibility in confrontations with his superior, as evidenced by their dramatic clash following the Battle of the Washita.

**The Battle of the Washita**

The Medicine Lodge Treaty signed in October 1867 required the Comanches and Kiowas to give up over 60,000 square miles of territory which they considered their home, and accept as a reserve a 48,000-square-mile area in the southwestern corner of the Indian Territory. In return, the tribes would be provided with some $30,000 worth of houses, barns, and schools they did not want.

The treaty for the Cheyennes and Arapahoes provided hunting rights to the Cheyennes only on lands south of the Arkansas River. However, they could continue to hunt north of the Arkansas so long as the buffalo remained and so long as they kept away from the white settlements. Later, when the buffalo were all gone, the Cheyennes could then move to their reservation, where the government could come for them.
The treaty was honored by the Comanches and Kiowas but in July 1868 the Cheyenne and Arapahoes began a series of raids on settlers in southern Kansas, killing approximately 13. General William T. Sherman, then in Omaha, received General Philip Sheridan's reports on the Cheyenne depredations and responded with an immediate call to compel their removal south of the Kansas line.

General Sheridan who had command of the Department of the Missouri concluded that a major campaign against the warring tribes of western Kansas had become necessary and made plans for simultaneous operations both north and south of the Arkansas River in order to keep the Indians from using either area for a sanctuary. It was to be a winter campaign in the hope that the Indians, who naturally congregated in large villages in secluded spots sheltered by trees along the river banks, might be rounded up and defeated decisively. The force at his disposal for these projected operations consisted of 11 troops of the 7th Cavalry, four companies of infantry, and the 19th Kansas Volunteer Cavalry.

Custer received his orders on 22 November 1868. They were explicit:

Proceed south, in the direction of the Antelope Hills, thence towards the Washita River, the supposed winter seat of the hostile tribes; to destroy their village and ponies; to kill or hang all warriors and bring back all women and children.
Monday morning, 23 November 1868, with over a foot of snow from the previous night's blizzard still covering the ground, Custer's column marched out, its band playing "The Girl I Left Behind Me." The column set off on a generally southwestern line of march, headed toward the Texas state line. The weather turned bitterly cold and the men, even clad in buffalo fur overcoats, were chilled to the bone.

On Thursday, 26 November (Thanksgiving Day), the 7th Cavalry marched as one column for about one mile until they came to a fork in the Canadian River. Here, Custer called a conference and instructed Major Joel Elliott to take three companies and proceed upstream (west) looking for a trail.

Less than two miles from Custer's crossing, Captain Albert Barnitz, leading Elliott's battalion, stumbled onto a trail in the snow. On seeing the trail, Benteen was convinced it was the trail of the same party he had encountered at Big Coon Creek two weeks before. Major Elliott sent a courier back to Custer. His three-company command formed into a column of fours and weapons were readied.

When Custer satisfied himself at last that he had found the camp for which he had been searching--it was located in the valley of the Washita, a small river in the
Indian territory—and that it was apparently a very large camp, judging from the number of lodges (approximately 50) which they could make out in the distance, he summoned the officers about him. There Custer gave them their final orders.

The regiment was divided into four squadrons; Major Elliott, with three troops, G, H, and M, was ordered to circle cautiously to the left and get in the rear of the Indian camp. Captain Thompson, with troops B and F, was directed to make a long detour to the right and join Elliott. Captain Myers, with troops E and I, was commanded to move a shorter distance to the right and take position on the left of Thompson, while Custer himself, with the four remaining troops—Captain Hamilton commanding one squadron, comprising troops A and C, Captain West, another, of troops D and K, and with the Osages and scouts and forty sharp-shooters under Adjutant Cook—was to approach the village from the point where they then stood. 17

Just before dawn on 27 November 1868, the first shot rang out. The 7th Cavalry had possession of the village within 10 minutes. The Indian efforts to resist were less successful than their efforts to flee. One party, estimated at more than 30 warriors, was systematically shot down in a ravine they occupied, by Cook's sharp-shooters across the river. The chief of the village, Black Kettle, 18 was shot off his horse by one of Hale's men near the river. His wife, mounted in front of him, was shot down as well. The bodies fell into the freezing water.
Inevitably, some of the cavalry men were hit too. Captain Hamilton died early in the fight, shot in the stomach near the village, perhaps by a stray bullet from one of his own men. Only one other trooper was killed in the village that day, although several were wounded. The Indians had perished by the score.

Meanwhile Lieutenant Godfrey, galloping north in search of Indian ponies, topped a rise and noticed a large number of tepees along the river about a mile away. He realized that the village the troops were attacking was only one of a number of camps along the Washita River. He heard heavy firing across the river on the other side of a large hill. It was Major Elliott and 16 men fighting for their lives. They were fighting a losing battle for survival. (See map, page 132.)

Pursuing the fleeing Indians, Elliott and his party suddenly ran into the midst of a horde of braves coming down the valley to help Black Kettle and the men who had been engaged with Custer. To flee was impossible. They dismounted from their horses, formed themselves in a semicircle a few feet in diameter, stood back to back, as it were, and fought until they died. Right dearly had they sold their lives.

According to Benteen, Custer was more concerned at the time with counting his spoils of war. He ordered Godfrey to take Troop K, scour the villages, and bring in all the valuables. This was done and the goods were amassed into piles and counted. In addition, the 7th
including most of the Cheyennes' clothing. As critical as anything to the Indians was their loss of 51 lodges.

Custer now set fire to the lodges, totally destroying them and their contents. What to do with the ponies of the herd which had been captured in spite of the efforts of the squaws to run off with them, was a problem. It was impossible, under the circumstances, to drive them back to camp. To turn them loose would have allowed them to fall into the hands of other Indians for use in future warfare. They had to be shot. 20

Benteen later expressed great disgust at Custer's method of destroying the ponies. He claimed that it endangered the men holding the perimeter. Benteen had a point, since at least 700 horses were killed in this manner and that meant an incredible amount of lead was flying in all directions. He implied that he remonstrated with Custer about this but received a sarcastic reply.

While the shooting was going on, Elliott was forgotten. This made Benteen even more angry. Custer later asserted that "parties were sent" looking for Elliott, but he never specified who or where. 21 To his dying day, Benteen insisted that there were no search parties formed.

About eight o'clock that night, Custer formed his command and led them northeast in the direction of the villages Godfrey had reported. When they reached the site of the camps, they found the Indians had fled and so they countermarched back toward the destroyed village. Custer moved back through the village and down his back trail
countermarched back toward the destroyed village. Custer moved back through the village and down his back trail until two o'clock the morning of 28 November, when he finally gave the command to halt and rest. In his official report, personally presented immediately afterward to General Sheridan, Custer invited himself to parade his victorious 7th Cavalry before the general. It made a grand spectacle, with Osage Indians arrayed in brilliant war-party costumes in a triumphant procession led by Custer before his commanding officer.

Following this festive performance, and about two weeks after the battle, General Sheridan accompanied Custer over the Washita battlefield. There, for the first time, a search was made to determine what had become of Major Elliott. In the barren snowbound hills, not over two miles from Black Kettle's captured village, Sheridan's party came upon the site. The bodies of the privates from Companies E, H, and M were found in a tight circle with Elliott. Sergeant-Major Kennedy was found about one mile away. The mutilated remains were carefully buried, with the exception of Elliott, whose body was placed in a wagon for shipment to a military cemetery. Benteen was appalled and furious. He wrote years later:
At the Washita we lost Major Elliott, Sergeant Major Kennedy -- a fine young soldier, and 16 enlisted men, and damn me if any search was made for them till a fortnight after. Now as ever, I want to get at who was to blame for not finding out then.

As the burial party rejoined the column and the entire command set off for Fort Cobb, Benteen had already decided who was to blame--George Armstrong Custer.

Sometime during late February 1868, while the regiment was in camp on Medicine Bluff Creek, a letter, scathingly critical of Custer's role in the Washita battle, appeared in the Missouri Democrat and later in the New York Times, and then was sent to Custer. It read in part, "And now, to learn why the anxiously-looked-for succor did not come, let us view the scene in the captured village, scarce two short miles away." The letter then launched into a biting description of how shots were heard for some time from the direction Major Elliott's troopers had taken; of how the commander spent the afternoon taking inventory of captured Indian loot and the sharpshooting of more than 800 Indian ponies and dogs, then marching away that night to join the wagon train--and how, through all of this, no attempt whatever was made to find Major Elliott's men.

The story is often told of how Custer called his officers together, the newspaper in one hand and his riding quirt in the other. He could tell, he said, that
the article had been written by one of the officers, and if he found out who it was he would give the guilty one a sound thrashing. After a moment, Captain Benteen stepped forward and asked to see the paper.

Benteen read a few lines of the newspaper article. He recognized it as a letter he had written to a friend in St. Louis without intending for it to be published.

The story goes that Benteen handed the newspaper back to Custer and at the same time adjusted his holster, saying that Custer could start in, because he, Benteen, was the author. Custer's face turned scarlet. Finally, with a tight voice, he growled that he would see Benteen later, and stomped away. Nothing more was ever said about the matter between the two men. But the controversy over Elliott's death had reopened an old sore within the 7th Regiment, one that would fester all the way to the Little Big Horn.

The Little Big Horn

There have been volumes written, studies conducted, clubs formed, and the battleground searched many times each day for over a hundred years by those trying to solve the mysteries surrounding George Armstrong Custer and the massacre of half of the 7th Cavalry regiment at the Little Big Horn on 25 June 1876. (See map, page 136.) A portion of the battle must be included in this paper because it was here that Benteen earned his place in history. Only Benteen's role will be discussed, leaving
the interested reader to research the entire battle from the volumes readily available.25

Custer had reorganized the 7th Cavalry into two wings of six companies each. The right wing, commanded by Major Reno, consisted of Companies B, C, E, I, F, and L. The left wing, consisting of Companies A, D, G, H, K, and M, was given to Captain Benteen who, since the departure of Hart and Thompson the previous December, was the senior captain of the 7th Cavalry. At five o'clock on the morning of 17 May 1876, the so-called Dakota Column marched. They were serenaded by the regimental band playing "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

On 7 June 1876 they reached the Powder River without incident, and were then joined by General Gibbon, who reported that his command was encamped along the Yellowstone, near the mouth of the Big Horn. Major Reno of the 7th Cavalry had been sent with six troops on a scouting expedition to the south and had discovered a major Indian trail leading west toward the Big Horn country.

On 20 June, Custer took Benteen's wing to the mouth of the Rosebud, reuniting it with Reno's six companies. The following afternoon, Custer, Reno, Gibbon, and General Terry had a three-hour conference on board the Far West. Reno had some explaining to do. From all accounts, he had not done a very good job in his reconnaissance.
Terry was angry because Reno had disobeyed orders and scouted the Rosebud on his own initiative. Custer was angry because Reno had not followed the trail he had found to see if it led to a camp.

When things calmed down, Terry decided to send all 12 companies of the 7th Cavalry under Custer on a scouting expedition up the Rosebud, to complete the job disobediently begun by Reno. Custer was instructed to scout all the way to the headwaters of the Rosebud, regardless of whether or not the trail extended that far west. Custer was then supposed to swing north, cross the divide between the Rosebud and the Big Horn, and move along the Little Big Horn until he joined forces with Terry, who would accompany Gibbon's command. Gibbon was to move to the north of the Big Horn and begin a sweep south. (See map, page 136.) When the conference finally broke up, Terry promised to send Custer a written copy of his instructions the next day. The 7th Cavalry was to begin its move up the Rosebud on 22 June.

On Sunday, 25 June 1876, the Officers' Call gathered at about eight o'clock in the morning to hear Custer's revised plan. His original plan, after an all night march out of the Rosebud valley the previous evening, had been to rest the 7th Cavalry all day on the 25th while cautiously working closer to the supposed
Indian camp on the Little Big Horn River. Custer had stated that he was going to attack at dawn on the 26th, just as he had attacked on the Washita seven and one-half years previously. Custer explained the circumstances--the scouts feared that the Dakota column had been discovered by the Sioux--and announced that he was going to charge the camp as soon as it could be reached. "Each commander was also ordered to inspect his troop and to satisfy himself that men and horses were ready for any contingency."26 As an incentive, Custer promised that the troops would march in the order in which the commanders reported them ready.

Benteen, who had already complied with Custer's instructions and whose company was closest at hand, stepped forward almost at once to claim the honor of leading the regiment. "I am really of the opinion," he later wrote, "that General Custer neither expected nor desired that I should have the advance of the regiment."27 In any case, Custer had little choice. He hesitated only an instant and then stammered, "Very well, Colonel Benteen, you have the lead."28

Shortly before 12 o'clock all was ready, and the regiment rode over the divide and started down into the valley of the Little Big Horn--for many of them the Valley of the Shadow--riding into regimental immortality to
become a part of one of the most legendary events of the Old West.

No division of the regiment had been made since the march up the Rosebud had begun, but Custer told Reno he would assign commands during the march. Now three troops, H, D, and K, commanded by Benteen, Weir, and Godfrey respectively, with a total of about 125 soldiers, were formed as one battalion under the command of Benteen, and ordered to diverge to the left at an angle of about 45 degrees.

While Benteen's column was still in sight, Custer sent two supplementary orders. The first, carried by Harry Voss, the chief trumpeter, apparently instructed Benteen to go to the second line of bluffs if he found nothing after reaching the first; the other, carried by the regimental sergeant major, told Benteen to go into the valley if he found no Indians on the second line of bluffs. In order to guard against ambush or surprise, he was also commanded to keep a well-mounted officer with five or six men well in advance of the rest of the detachment to report whether any Indians could be seen.

The orders had an unfortunate effect on Benteen. He concluded that Custer had sent him too hastily on an aimless mission. When Lieutenant Frank Gibson reported that the tops of the bluffs contained no Indians and there
was no valley to speak of on its other side, Benteen was even more convinced that Custer did not know what he was doing. He realized he was beyond supporting distance of the rest of the regiment. In fact, as his men finally worked their way into the badlands on the other side of the first line of bluffs, his position was almost identical to the position Major Elliott found at the Washita. Straying too far from the balance of the regiment and with Custer preoccupied, Elliott had been surrounded and wiped out. Benteen believed,

From being a participant in the battle of the Washita, November 1868 and from seeing the manner the 7th cavalry was handled there, by Custer, I formed an opinion that at some day, a big portion of his command would be 'scooped' if such faulty measures were persisted in. 31

Estimates of the time vary erratically and are highly controversial even today, but Benteen was away from the main trail for at least two hours and possibly more than three. The fight had already begun when Benteen and his men halted to water their horses and fill their canteens. Once back on the trail, they had traveled a mile when they encountered a messenger on his way to tell the pack train commander to hurry to Custer's location. Benteen told Sergeant Daniel Knipe that the packs were about one mile behind and pointed back down the trail. Sergeant Knipe remembered telling Benteen, "They want you
there as quick as you can get there—they have struck a big Indian camp." He galloped away without elaborating. What Knipe knew, but did not have time to explain, was that Custer had sent Major Reno and three companies across the Little Big Horn River to attack the camp and he swung north with five companies, paralleling the river. In short, Benteen was no longer following the trail of eight companies, he was following two different trails.

According to Benteen, the battalion was on a "stiff trot" when another messenger came riding up on a limping horse. The messenger was one of Benteen's own men, a trumpeter from H Company who had been picked as regimental orderly that morning—Private John Martin. In a letter to his wife, Benteen wrote:

I will commence this letter by sending a copy of the last lines Cooke ever wrote, which was an order to me to this effect. Benteen. Come on. Big village. Be quick, bring packs. W. W. Cooke. P.S. Bring pacs. He left out the 'k' in the last packs. I have the original, but it is so badly torn—and it should be preserved. So keep this letter—as the matter may be of interest hereafter, likewise of use. This note was brought back to me by Trumpeter Martin, of my Co. (which fact saved his life). When I received it, I was five or six miles from the village, perhaps more, and the packs at least that distance in my rear.

Benteen read the note and handed it to Captain Weir, who joined him. He then asked Martin where Custer was. The young trumpeter replied that Custer was about three miles from where they stood. Benteen also inquired
if Custer was under attack, which drew an affirmative response. After the message was read by the officers, Benteen was heard to remark, "Well! If he wants me to hurry to him, how does he expect that I can bring the packs? If I am going to be of service to him, I think I had better not wait for the packs." 35

Benteen's men began to trot toward the sound of gunfire. Some, apparently Weir's company, went almost to the river. Benteen, in front, was startled by the sudden appearance of about four Indians, who proved to be Crow scouts making off with some hostile ponies they had stolen. They informed Benteen rather emotionally that something big was happening just behind them on a bluff east of the river.

Large numbers of mounted Indians were riding down a small number of cavalrymen in the valley of the Little Big Horn. Benteen could see the survivors of the route headed for a high bluff less than a mile from his observation post. He gathered his three companies together in a single column, directed them to draw pistols, and charged toward the bluff at a gallop. According to trumpeter Martin, who was riding with Benteen:

We followed General Custer's trail until we got near the ridge where the General and I had first seen the village. We could see the fight going on in the valley, and Reno's command was retreating to the side of the river we were on. As we approached them,
Colonel Reno came out to meet us. He was dismounted, his hat was gone, and he had a handkerchief tied around his forehead. He was out of breath and excited, and raised his hand and called to Colonel Benteen. We all heard him. He said, "For God's sake, Benteen, halt your command and help me. I've lost half my men." Part of his men were still coming up the hill, some mounted and some dismounted, and the Indians were firing at them from the hills and ravines nearby. They were pretty much excited and disorganized when we got there. Colonel Benteen said, "Where's Custer?" and Colonel Reno answered, "I don't know. He went off downstream and I haven't seen or heard anything of him since."36

Benteen was appalled at the sight of the survivors. He noted that Captain Moylan of A Company was "blabbering like a whipped urchin."37 He also noticed that the Indians who had been enthusiastically chasing down Reno's men were rapidly disappearing. He began to walk among the survivors to learn the situation. French's M Company, one of the Fort Rice companies, had done well. Moylan's A Company had escaped more or less intact, although they had quite a few wounded. McIntosh's C Company had ceased to exist as a fighting unit for the time being.

Benteen hurried to Reno and insisted that the command "fortup" near where Reno had taken refuge from the valley fight. Reno agreed and Benteen went to work, laying out positions for the cavalry troops who were rushing back. He placed Wallace's miniscule C Company on the east side of one hill and "gathered the procession as it came,
stringing it around an arc of a circle from Wallace's position west. In the end, Reno and Benteen occupied two hills with a shallow depression between them—ideal for coralling the horses and pack mules. Benteen's own company was placed alone on the second hill, the higher of the two.

It was not a moment too soon. Large numbers of Indians appeared on all sides and began sniping at long range while darting forward from time to time as if about to rush the cavalry position. Benteen later wrote:

I state about the facts when I say that we had a fairly warm time with those red men as long as sufficient light was left for them to draw a bead on us, and the same I'm free to maintain, in the language of Harte. I don't know how many of the miscreants there were;—probably we shall never know,—but there were enough.

As it began to get dark, the Indian attacks decreased considerably. The Sioux and their allies were reluctant to fight at night, but they did not leave the battlefield. They kept Reno and his seven companies effectively pinned down and waited for the morning sun. For the most part, the Indians remained hidden from view in the sagebrush clumps and high bunch grass of the Montana foothills. They were concentrated in the ravines between Reno's men and the river and had worked their way up to occupy the position that H Company had abandoned during the night.
Benteen got little if any sleep that night. At first light, Sergeant Roy's gallant pickets came scampering in, followed by a fusillade from hidden Indian marksmen, and the fight was renewed. Benteen moved up and down his lines, directing the fire. He had the heel of his boot shot off in the presence of trumpeter Martin, who remembered that the gray-haired captain merely muttered, "Pretty close call--try again," as he flung the shredded boot-heel toward the Indians. Private Glease of H Company recalled:

Benteen was on his feet all day, and it being hot, his shirt tail worked out of his pants and hung down, and he went around that way encouraging the men. It is live or die with us. We must fight it out with them.

At about nine o'clock in the morning, Benteen walked in front of his own lines in full view of the sniping Indians and shouted to his men.

I told them I was getting mad, and I wanted them to charge down the ravines with me when I gave the yell: then each to yell as if provided with a thousand throats. The Chinese act was sufficiently good enough for me if it would work; but I hadn't so much real trust in its efficacy. However, when the throttles of the "H sters" were given full play, and we dashed into the unsuspecting savages who were amusing themselves by throwing clods of dirt, arrows by hand, and otherwise, for simple, pure cussedness among us, to say that 'twas a surprise to them, is mild form, for they somersaulted and vaulted as so many trained acrobats, having no order in getting down those ravines, but quickly getting; de'il take the hindmost.
The precipitous departure of the Indians enabled Benteen to reoccupy the position he had abandoned during the night. It also gave him an idea about securing water by sending men down one of the ravines that seemed to have been completely abandoned by the Indians in their haste to get away from his charge.

About two o'clock in the afternoon the Indians set fire to the grass on the prairie between their village and the cavalry position. The fighting had died down, limited to occasional sniping from both sides. The cavalry men began to move around more freely and tended to the business of improving their defenses. Sergeant Roy, who led the first water party and who may have participated in others, said, "Benteen saved the command, according to my opinion. He was a very brave and nervy man." Benteen had been hit in the right thumb by a spent bullet, the only wound he received during the battle. He continued to walk the lines, sucking his wounded thumb and directing the gathering of water.

Just before dark, the Indian village was dismantled. The combined Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho began a long march south toward the Big Horn Mountains in full view of the surviving 7th Cavalry. Lieutenant Godfrey watched this procession with awe:
This moving was distant about five or six miles, but looked much nearer, and was almost directly between us and the setting sun, now darkened by the smoke and dust-laden atmosphere; the travois with families and belongings and the pony herds was massed, the long column with wide front was skirted by the warriors on guard; thus silhouetted against the redlined western sky-line, their departure was to us a gladsome sight. A fervent "Thank God" that they had at last given up the contest was soon followed by grave doubts as to their motive for moving. Perhaps Custer had met Terry, and was coming to our relief. Perhaps they were short of ammunition and were moving their village to a safe distance before making a final desperate effort to overwhelm us. Perhaps it was only a ruse to get us on the move and then clean us out were the conjectures.

The Aftermath

On the hill overlooking the Little Big Horn River, Reno's men had taken advantage of the respite to strengthen their position and to make better provision for care of the wounded. At 9:30 on the morning of 27 June 1876, a column of dust was observed in the valley, and fear that it might be the Indians returning suddenly gripped the command. Lieutenant Godfrey later wrote:

An hour of suspense followed; but from the slow advance we concluded that they were our own troops. "But whose command is it?" It could not be Custer; it must be Crook for if it were Terry, Custer would be with him. Cheer after cheer was given for Crook. A white scout, Muggins Taylor, came up with a note from General Terry, addressed to General Custer, dated June 26th, stating that the two of our Crow scouts had given information that our column had been whipped and nearly all had been killed; that he did not believe their story, but was coming with medical assistance.
Godfrey made contact with Lieutenant James H. Bradley of Gibbon's 7th Infantry and was struck speechless by the infantry officer's answer to the question, "Where is Custer?"

"I don't know," replied Bradley, who was functioning as Terry's scout commander, "but I suppose he was killed. We counted one hundred and ninety-seven bodies. I don't suppose any escaped."46

Until that moment, no one in Reno's command had any certain knowledge of Custer's fate. No one had imagined that Custer had been wiped out; at least, no one had voiced that opinion. Most felt that Custer abandoned them for one reason or another. Lieutenant Charles Roe of Gibbon's Montana column stated.

"... when General Terry arrived on the morning of 27 June, the first question Benteen asked was if Terry knew where Custer had gone. Terry said, "To the best of my knowledge and belief he lies on this ridge about four miles below here with all of his command killed."

Benteen said, "I can hardly believe it. I think he is somewhere down the Big Horn grazing his horses. At the Battle of the Washita he went off and left part of his command, and I think he would do it again."

General Terry said, "I think you are mistaken and you will take your company and go down where the dead are lying and investigate for yourself."47

About three-quarters of a mile from the stream they found the remains of Troop L, and behind them the
other companies. On the high point of the ridge they found the body of Custer surrounded by the bodies of most of his officers and about 40 troopers. The bodies had been lying in the sun almost two days and were covered with flies. Still, many were recognizable.

In a letter to his wife, Benteen's first conclusion about the fight included:

Whether the Indians allowed Custer's column to cross [Little Big Horn] at all is a mooted question, but I am of the opinion that nearly, if not all of the five companies got into the village—but were driven out immediately—fleeing in great disorder and crossing by two instead of the one ford by which they entered. E Company going by the left and F, I and L by the same one they crossed. What became of C Company no one knows—they must have charged thro' below the village, gotten away—or have been killed in the bluffs on the village side of stream as very few of C Company's horses were found. Jack Sturgis' and Porter's clothes were found in the village.

After the Indians had driven them across, it was a regular buffalo hunt for them—and not a man escaped. We buried 203 of the bodies of Custer's command the 2d day after fight. The bodies were as recognizable as if they were in life.

Years later, Benteen doubted Custer had reached the village or even the ford site, but from beginning to end, he was convinced that Custer's fight had been a poor one.

I am reckless as to whose feelings I hurt, but it is my firm belief and always has been, the Custer's command didn't do any "1st class" fighting there, and if possible were worse handled even than Reno's battalion. Three hundred men well fought should have made a better showing.
The somber, shaken search party returned to their position. There was much idle talk that night concerning the battle. Many of the officers were vehement in their condemnation of Major Reno's conduct during the battle. This was exacerbated when Reno produced his official report of the engagement which commended only one officer for exceptional conduct. The one officer was Benteen. Reno wrote in his report on 4 July 1876:

During my fight with the Indians, I had the heartiest support from officers and men; but the conspicuous services of Brevet Colonel F. W. Benteen I desire to call attention to especially, for if ever a soldier deserved recognition by his Government for distinguished services he certainly does. . . . [The civilian guide, George Harendeen, said] I think Captain Benteen saved the fight on the hill. None of us knew with certainty what had become of General Custer until General Terry came up with Gibbon's command on the morning of the 27th of June.50

Benteen was convinced from the moment he reviewed and reflected on the disaster that Custer was solely responsible. He never wavered in that conviction.

Had Custer carried out the orders he got from Genl. Terry—the commands would have formed a junction exactly at the village—and have captured the whole outfit of tepees, etc., and probably any quantity of squaws, papooses, etc., but Custer obeyed orders from the fact of not wanting any other command—or body to have a finger in the pie—and thereby lost his life.51

Over and over Benteen would repeat his beliefs. Custer disobeyed Terry's order to scout all the way to the
headwaters of the Rosebud whether the trail led that way or not. Custer then unwisely split the regiment before attempting any reconnaissance of the village or listening to his Indian scouts. Finally he concluded, "Custer galloped away from his reinforcement and so lost himself."52

Once again Captain Benteen demonstrated his skill as a soldier. Under battle conditions he had no equal; he was cool under fire; and he seemed to be at his best when the pressure of attack was near. He was able to direct his cavalry troops to strategic positions when bullets were screaming nearby. Captain Benteen's decisions were sound, and he earned the plaudits of both his men and his peers after the battle.

During the years following the Little Big Horn, Benteen spent time at the Springfield Arsenal in Massachusetts testing repeating rifles and carbines for possible army adoption. On 4 October 1882, Benteen finished his service on the Board on Magazine Guns and on 21 October succeeded Captain Edward J. Spaulding as Mounted Recruiting Officer at the New York Rendezvous. There, on 23 January 1883, he was notified of his promotion to major effective 17 December 1882. Major Albert P. Morrow of the 9th Cavalry had been promoted to lieutenant colonel. By December 1882 Benteen, the senior captain in the cavalry
service, was assigned to the vacant major's slot in the 9th Cavalry.
Notes, Chapter 3


2. Benteen, Court-Martial Transcript, 86.

3. Ibid.


5. Benteen, Court-Martial Transcript, 87.


8. Ibid.

9. Benteen, Court-Martial Transcript, 89.


13. Benteen, Court-Martial Transcript, 86.


15. General Sheridan insisted that the Indians must be caught before spring or they would not be caught at all, for he fully realized the difficulties which would be presented by the weather and the country inhabited by the hostiles. He believed the Indians should be attacked and
punished during the winter while they were divided into small bands and their ponies weakened from lack of forage.

16Keim, 103.

17Cyrus Townsend Brady, Indian Fights and Fighters (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1904), 157-158. (See map, page 132.)

18Black Kettle, Cheyenne chief, survived the Sand-creek Massacre by troops under the command of Colonel John M. Chivington in Colorado Territory. He later was involved in the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867, although he was not one of the signers.

19Brady, 167-168.

20Ibid., 164.


22Carroll, Benteen-Goldin Letters, 11 October 1894.

23Missouri Democrat (St. Louis) 8 February 1869.


26Brininstool, The Custer Fight, 10-11.

27Carroll, Camp Talk, 181.

28Graham, 179.


31 F. W. Benteen, Letters to David F. Barry, 1888-1898, 12 May 1897.

32 Hammer, 93.

33 Carroll, Camp Talk, 22.

34 Ibid.

35 Hammer, 54-55.

36 Graham, 143.


38 Ibid.

39 Graham, 181.

40 Hammer, 101.

41 Ibid., 136.

42 Graham, 182.

43 Hammer, 114.

44 Graham, 145.

45 Ibid., 146.

46 Ibid.

47 Hammer, 249.


49 Carroll, Benteen-Goldin Letters, 12 August 1896.

50 Graham, 246.

51 Carroll, Camp Talk, 25.

52 Carroll, Benteen-Goldin Letters, 10 February 1896.
CHAPTER 4
THE NINTH CAVALRY REGIMENT

Nearly 200,000 black soldiers fought in the Civil War to assist in gaining freedom for their people. After the struggle ended, Congress enacted legislation to incorporate black units into the regular army. Congress deliberately made provision to segregate the black units in the 1866 legislation, ostensibly to avoid the issue of racial superiority. James G. Blaine, a leading Republican senator from Maine, stated in a speech he made in the Senate several years later that the separation stipulated in the 1866 law was "to give the colored man the right to enlist in the Army of the United States, and not to raise unnecessarily the question of caste, and color, and prejudice in the Army."¹ Actually, Congress was not ready to implement so great a social change in the 1860s, and despite Blaine's disclaimer, the existence of these regiments did raise a whole variety of questions concerning the color line.

Congress cleared up some of the uncertainty surrounding the future of blacks in the armed forces on 28 July 1866 when it passed an act under which blacks could
serve in the regular peacetime army. Six regiments of black troops were authorized—two of cavalry and four of infantry. By this legislation Congress opened a new chapter in American military history and created an opportunity for the erstwhile slaves to play a major role in the settlement of the West.

On 3 August 1866, General Ulysses S. Grant telegraphed General Philip Sheridan, commanding the Division of the Gulf, and General William T. Sherman, commanding the Military Division of the Missouri, to organize a regiment of black cavalry in their respective divisions. The new regiments were designated as the 9th and 10th United States Cavalry, and Grant recommended two officers with brilliant Civil War records to command them—Colonel Edward Hatch of Iowa and Colonel Benjamin Grierson of Illinois.²

Hatch leading the 9th Cavalry and Grierson at the head of the 10th Cavalry wasted no time in proceeding with the organization of their regiments. The former established headquarters in Greenville, Louisiana, and the latter at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. From the first, however, the regiments encountered difficulty in procuring experienced officers, for many of them refused to serve with black troops. Until the end of the Indian War period (1865-1890), an officer was promoted within a regiment
until he reached the rank of colonel. Many officers were reluctant to take positions in the black regiments because of the effect they believed this service might have on the rest of their careers. Despite opportunities for higher rank and more rapid promotion in the black regiments, the feelings of many officers of lower rank were expressed clearly in an advertisement that appeared in the *Army and Navy Journal*:

A First Lieutenant of Infantry [white] stationed at a very desirable post in the Department of the South desires a transfer with an officer in the same grade, on equal terms if in a white regiment; but if in a colored regiment, a reasonable bonus would be expected.

Many officers also doubted that black men had the ability to become competent soldiers, making it still more difficult to find skilled and literate enlisted men to fill positions at the company and regimental level. Under these circumstances, officer procurement proceeded at a snail's pace. In November, Hatch complained to the adjutant general that although he had several hundred recruits on hand at Greenville, and was receiving arms and horses, he still did not have a single officer present for duty.

Officer procurement was stepped up and the 9th Cavalry Regiment obtained some excellent ones, including Lieutenant Colonel Wesley Merritt and Major Albert P. Morrow; however, procurement was still much too slow, as
recruits poured into the camp at Greenville. In the beginning, the recruits were a rather sorry lot; few had any military experience, few could ride a horse, and almost none could read or write.

Army recruiters, with great haste and little judgment, concentrated their efforts in nearby New Orleans and vicinity and had little difficulty in enlisting the necessary numbers, for in most instances they seemed to have winked at physical qualifications. Many young black men were eager to enlist because the army afforded an opportunity for social and economic betterment difficult to achieve in a society that was virtually closed to them.

Despite the difficulties and shaky discipline, Hatch managed to organize all 12 companies of the regiment by February 1867, even though only 11 officers had reported for duty at that time. Rumors of impending service on the frontier were circulating among the men, and the officers noted that some of their neophyte troopers were becoming surly and unruly. Rumor became fact in March, when Hatch received orders transferring the regiment to Texas. Two companies, L and M, were to be stationed at Brownsville on the Rio Grande, while the remaining 10 companies were to encamp near San Antonio and undergo further training.
Marching orders had come too soon. Hatch had little more than an ill-disciplined mob on his hands and the stage was set for violence and tragedy.

Enroute to San Antonio mutiny flared in K Company and was suppressed only with great difficulty. When the city was reached, no brass bands turned out to welcome black men in blue uniforms and friction developed quickly between troopers and citizens. Clashes with police became an almost daily occurrence.

Serious trouble was only a matter of time, and it came on April 9 as too few officers strove to control their men. Mutiny broke out in A, E, and K Companies, and before order was restored, young Lieutenant Seth Griffin of A received a mortal wound and Lieutenant Fred Smith of K was forced to shoot two of his troopers.

Hatch placed the blame for this tragic affair on a shortage of officers. Captain W. S. Abert, 6th Cavalry, who was assigned to investigate the mutiny, sustained him, but added that many of the men were "too light, too young and have weak constitutions." He might have added that among the villains in the piece were careless or indifferent recruiters who had enlisted far too many men who were unfit for military service.

Hatch appealed for more officers, pointing out that only 14 had been present at the time of the mutiny and that little could be expected of the regiment until this shortage was corrected. The War Department responded quickly, and within a month Hatch could report that both morale and discipline were much improved. It was none too
soon, for conditions in the vast expanse of west Texas and along the Rio Grande were fast becoming intolerable and troops were needed badly.

Hatch received orders in May to march west and occupy Forts Stockton and Davis. Before midsummer all ten companies had reached these posts, and an untried regiment with the stain of mutiny on its standard faced the formidable task of standing guard over hundreds of miles of raw frontier.6

Mere patrolling of the vast region in their charge was a well-nigh impossible task. It was characterized by hundreds of miles of brush jungle along the Rio Grande, by vast areas of plain, desert, and mountain where water was often scarce or entirely absent, where terrain was incredibly rough and broken, where temperatures ranged from above 100 degrees in summer to well below freezing in winter, and where violent and sudden changes were the norm. But the 9th faced more formidable challenges than those posed by weather and terrain.

The principal duty of the command in western Texas was to open up and protect the mail and stage route from San Antonio to El Paso; to establish law and order in the country contiguous to the Rio Grande frontier, which had been sadly interfered with by Mexicans as well as Indians during the Civil War; to prevent marauding by Indians and to capture and confine to their reservations all roving bands; in fact, to help pave the way for the western advance of civilization, and to add their part in the great work of opening to settlement the vast resources of the great West.7

The movement westward of the 9th Cavalry in the spring and summer of 1867 marked the beginning of more
than two decades of continuous service on the Great Plains and in the mountains and deserts of New Mexico and Arizona. The regiment faced a formidable challenge. Ten years of nearly constant campaigning were required before the wild riding nomads of the southern plains—the Comanches, Kiowas, Kiowa-Apaches, Southern Cheyennes, and Arapahoes—were defeated and confined to their reservations. It was half again as long before peace prevailed along the tortured Rio Grande frontier, where Kickapoos, Lipans, and Mexican bandits and revolutionaries roamed, raided, stole, and murdered under conditions approaching anarchy. For just as many years, the 9th Cavalry fought the Apaches of New Mexico and Arizona in mountain nests and on waterless, desolate desert wastes.

The 9th Cavalry was reassigned to Kansas and the Indian Territory in November 1881. The move was intended to give them a well deserved rest, but it did not work out that way. Aside from the always tough (and dangerous) task of providing security for the Indian agents and generally keeping a watchful eye on Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche, and other redoubtable former foes on the reservation, Hatch's men were responsible for keeping white settlers out of Indian territory. White intruders, who were known as Boomers, had been making persistent efforts to settle unclaimed land in the Indian Territory
since the end of hostilities on the southern plains in the early 1870s. It fell to Hatch and the 9th Cavalry to evict them. In August 1883, a man named William L. Couch led a group of settlers into what is now Oklahoma. Hatch's patrols from Fort Riley chased Couch out no less than three times, and formed a cordial working relationship with the man.

Couch could scarcely complain of treatment he received at the hands of the buffalo soldiers, for they often shared their beans, bacon, and hardtack with him and his followers.

F. W. Benteen remained behind, commanding the post at Fort Riley in Colonel Hatch's absence.

The era of good feeling, such as it was, came to an abrupt end in the spring of 1884. Couch returned to Indian Territory with 1,000 Boomers, settling in four camps along the North Canadian River near what is now Oklahoma City. The 9th Cavalry took to the field yet again and coaxed the stubborn squatters to return to Kansas. On 16 May 1884, Major Benteen was assigned to command the post at Fort Sill.

In June 1884, a man named David Payne led another 1,500 Boomers into the territory. Payne, who died in November, had been an officer in the Kansas volunteer regiment and had participated in the Washita campaign from Camp Supply in 1868.
Captain Couch succeeded to the command of the boomers on the death of Payne in November last. On the 15th of January last, General Hatch, in command of the United States forces opposing the boomers, sent word to Couch from his headquarters in Camp Russell, Indian Territory, warning him not to proceed in his scheme of colonization. Captain Couch, then at the head of four hundred men, defied the United States officer. On January 23, General Hatch sent Lieutenant Day, with forty-two soldiers to Captain Couch, at his encampment at Stillwater. Lieutenant Day requested the boomers to quit. Captain Couch ordered them to prepare for battle, and Lieutenant Day retired. On January 25, General Hatch visited Couch's camp in person and offered him twenty-four hours in which to retreat. The general had at hand four companies from Fort Leavenworth, one from Fort Gibson, Indian Territory, one from Fort Lyon, Colorado, three from Fort Wingate, and three troops of cavalry from Fort Riley. After a parley, Couch made a conditional surrender, and on January 26 left the territory with the honors of war. Troops and boomers fraternized immediately after the surrender.

The Indians were upset by the migration, and since the Indian Wars were recorded as over, at least in that part of the country, they were being regularly supplied with weapons and ammunition for hunting. The situation got so bad in February 1885 that Colonel Hatch sent for Benteen to command a squadron (the new official name for a cavalry battalion) along the Kansas/Indian Territory border near Caldwell, Kansas.

Benteen reported to his regimental commander for duty on 4 March 1885. Hatch insisted that he had not requested the Department to order Benteen for command specifically. Benteen, who had a copy of a letter Hatch had written saying just the opposite, was infuriated by
Hatch's deception. The letter, still in existence, has Benteen's angry comment written on the back of it. In part, it characterizes Hatch as "a more thorough lying scoundrel than even Geo. A. Custer--if such were possible." 10

While patrolling the border, Benteen received word that his father had died in Atlanta on 9 March 1885.

While engaged in keeping Oklahoma Boomers out of the Indian Territory in Spring of 1885, I was notified of the death of my father on my plantation in Georgia, so after getting the "Boomers" in a fair way of listening to reason, I applied for a short leave to go and attend to my affairs in Georgia, and while so engaged I learned of my change of station.

When Benteen returned to Fort Sill, he was told the 9th Cavalry was being redeployed to Wyoming Territory. The Benteens packed their household belongings in wagons and set out with three other families for the rail head at Henrietta, Texas--65 miles away. They expected to be on the trail three days, but as Benteen put it,

On the first march out we had not gotten the tents fairly pinned down when one of the most fearful storms of rain came on, one such as only Byron can describe. The skies cleared somewhat the next day, and all the clear part was taken advantage of in drying ourselves. As expected, though, it was impossible to turn a wheel with all of that extra weight of water in tents and bedding. 11

Unable to ford the streams and rivulets, the group was forced to live off the land until the water levels receded enough to ford with local wagons. The men hunted
game and the women cooked it in what became an extended picnic. The trip took 23 days.

They boarded a train at Henrietta that took them to Fort Riley, where the men took command of their respective units and the 9th Cavalry marched overland to their new homes. (See map, page 133.) Major Benteen commanded the Second Squadron on the march, leaving 12 June 1885. The Second Squadron, consisting of Troops B, D, E, H, and L, arrived at Fort McKinney on 1 August 1885.

Fort McKinney was established near Buffalo, Wyoming, in late 1876 as a forward supply base for troops rounding up the hostile Sioux after the Little Big Horn battle. (See map, page 134.) The Second Squadron garrisoned the post along with two infantry companies from the 9th and 21st Infantry regiments. McKinney was also the regimental headquarters of Hatch's 9th Cavalry, although seven of its troops were parceled out to other posts.

Benteen, still the junior major of the regiment, applied for an exchange of regiments with Major Lewis Merrill (of the 7th). Incredibly, the swap was approved all the way up the chain of command, including General Sheridan, the Commanding General, but a sharp-eyed lawyer in the adjutant general's office pointed out that the exchange was not in accordance with army regulations. In accepting the exchange, Merrill was to be the junior major
of the 9th while Benteen became the senior major of the 7th. The exchange was disapproved in January 1886.

On 23 June 1886, Benteen was placed on detached service to go to Fort Custer and attend the 10th anniversary of the Battle of Little Big Horn. The battlefield looked quite different 10 years after the battle. The hasty burials of 28 June 1876 had not endured natural erosion and the work of scavengers, primarily wolves. A year after the battle, Company I under Captain Henry J. Nowland reburied human and horse bones, and attempted to mark where each man had fallen with a wooden stake. They disinterred Custer's bones and shipped them to West Point, where they were reburied amid considerable ceremony on 10 October 1877. Benteen was philosophical. In 1879 he told Robert Newton Price:

Cadets for ages to come will bow in humility at the Custer shrine at West Point, and—if it makes better soldiers and men of them, why the necessity of knocking the paste eye out of their idol?  

That same year, a memorial of logs was erected for the fallen 7th Cavalry men at the battlefield. In 1881, it was replaced with a granite monument that endures to this day. "It is about as well—or perhaps better—" Benteen said, "that the world should look back upon Custer as a martyr rather than a full fledged braying donkey that he was."
Major Benteen returned to Fort McKinney on 30 June 1886. He had just one month to enjoy the amenities of an established post. In Utah Territory, the Ute Indians on the Uintah Reservation east of Salt Lake City were becoming restless because of alleged inequities at the agency, still smoldering with resentment over their forced removal from Colorado six years previously. In the fall of 1879 many of these same Utes had rebelled against an officious reservation agent and reacted in rage on a cavalry column he had called in to help him. Further bloodshed (and an all-out war) was averted only by the intervention of a chief named Ouray. In 1886, Ouray was dead.

On 5 July 1886, the second major of the 9th Cavalry, Thomas B. DeWees, died. DeWees had been a captain in the Second Cavalry with Crook at the Battle of the Rosebud 10 years before. Benteen moved up one notch on the regimental roster, and his former slot was filled by Captain James F. Randlett of the 8th Cavalry.

On 2 August 1886, Benteen was instructed to ready two troops of the 9th Cavalry (B and F Troops) for a forced march toward Fort Duchesne.
Notes, Chapter 4

1 U.S. Congress, Senate, Congressional Record, 45th Cong., 2d sess., 2328.

2 General Ulysses S. Grant, telegram to General Philip Sheridan and General William T. Sherman, 4 August 1886, SLB Relations to the 9th and 10th Cavalry, AGO B6 94, NA.

3 Army and Navy Journal 8 (10 June 1871): 684.

4 San Antonio Daily Express 8 May 1867.

5 Edward Hatch, Report to the AA6, District of Texas, 14 May 1867, SDLB, AGO; Captain W. S. Abert to the AG, 7 June 1867.

6 Organizational Returns, 9th Cavalry, May-June 1867.

7 Rodenbough and Haskin, 280.

8 Organizational Returns, 9th Cavalry, October-November 1867.


10 Carroll, Cavalry Scraps, 43.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Graham, 325.

14 Benteen, Letters to Berry.
CHAPTER 5
A NEW FORT IN UTAH TERRITORY

Major Benteen dutifully packed his household belongings, supervised a hasty packing of the equipment of B and F Troops of the 9th Cavalry, and was on his way south. The column, with wives and children, made slow progress down the length of Wyoming territory in the first two weeks of August. They reached the Union Pacific Railroad near Rock Creek, expecting to be allowed to go into camp and sort out their equipment. (See map, page 135.) Instead, they found orders directing them to board a specially provisioned train and speed to Fort Bridger in the southwest part of the territory. Brigadier General George Crook, the commanding general of the Department of the Platte (which covered the modern-day states of Nebraska, Iowa, Wyoming, and Utah) was waiting impatiently. (See map, page 134.)

Until April 1886, General Crook had been the commanding officer of the Department of Arizona. After a long-standing quarrel with General Sheridan over the conduct of the campaign against Geronimo, Crook asked to be
relieved of command in Arizona. Sheridan promptly granted Crook's request and replaced him with Nelson A. Miles. Crook, still smoldering over the Geronimo debacle, was gratuitously insulted by recurring rumors about his conduct when he had commanded the Department of the Platte 10 years earlier. He had acquired the nickname "Rosebud George," a reference to his controversial fight on 17 June 1876 with the same Indians who wiped out Custer one week later. When Crook returned to Omaha, the headquarters of the Department of the Platte, he was more than usually sensitive to criticism.

On 7 August 1886, a young officer named Kennon overheard a conversation between Crook and Colonel William B. Royall that he recorded in his diary. Royall had been the commanding officer of Crook's cavalry at the Rosebud.

For ten years I have suffered silently the obloquy of having made a bad fight at Rosebud when the fault was in yourself and Nickerson. There was a good chance to make a charge, but it couldn't be done because of the condition of the cavalry. I sent word to you to 'come in' and waited two hours--nearer three--before you obeyed. I sent Nickerson three times at least. Couriers passed constantly between the points where we were respectively. I had the choice of assuming responsibility myself for the failure of my plans or court-martiailling you and Nickerson. I chose to bear the responsibility myself. The failure of my plan was due to your conduct.

It was an angry Crook who awaited the coming of Benteen's two troop squadrons at Fort Bridger. He
dispatched four companies of the 21st Infantry south into Utah Territory to the Ute Reservation. Crook was anxious to meet potential Indian trouble with an impressive show of force, and to build a post to be known as Fort Duchesne on the reservation.

Major Benteen's men were crammed into three box-cars and sped west. Troop property was hopelessly mixed up. When they arrived at Fort Bridger, they found the impatient Crook had gone ahead with the infantry companies, leaving instructions for Benteen to follow at once with the cavalry troops. There was not sufficient transport for most of the property that had been brought from Fort McKinney, so it was left behind with assurance that it would be sent along as soon as transportation could be obtained.

The road from Fort Bridger to Fort Duchesne traversed the rugged and steep Uinta Mountains. It was winding, rough, and very narrow, barely wide enough for a wagon to pass. It is small wonder that Major Benteen had a more than usual problem in crossing mountains that he had never seen before and probably had never been at that altitude.

The journey south was agony for Benteen. His back hurt, his eyes smarted, and he ached all over from neuralgia. He had developed a bladder problem that made it
impossible for him to be in the saddle for more than 15 minutes. He stopped three or four times an hour to urinate. General Crook sent a courier back with instructions for Benteen to overtake the infantry companies, which had a three-day head start. When Benteen failed to make satisfactory progress, Crook ordered him to split his squadron into two troops and send one ahead as fast as their horses could be pushed. Crook and the infantry arrived at a point about three miles above the junction of the Duchesne and Uinta Rivers on 20 August. The next day, Crook designated the location as the site for the new post. Benteen staggered in with the trailing cavalry troops and wagon train on 22 August. Crook departed, making Major Benteen the commanding officer of the unbuilt Fort Duchesne.

According to General Crook's diary dated 20 August 1886, "Selected site for new post near the bridge on the Uintah River on its right fork some 2-1/2 miles [actually about 8] above its junction with the Duchesne River." The department commander had returned to Fort Bridger on the day following his selection of the site.²

Early photographs of Fort Duchesne show that it was situated on a plain which was limited to the north by the Uinta Mountains and on the west by the Uinta River, with its attendant cottonwoods and underbrush. The plain
was covered with sagebrush, shadbush, and prickly pear. For the first six months, Duchesne was no more than a tent encampment, its garrison painfully exposed to heat and dust in the early weeks of summer and to icy winds and snow when winter arrived. The wall tents were banked with earth for added warmth, and tall stovepipes jutted through the canvas like the funnels of old fashioned steamboats.

The quarters of some of the officers were nevertheless quite elaborate. (See Figure 10, page 142.)

All are in tents of course. I enclose a diagram showing how some of us live. Some such arrangement as this is general, though none except Colonel Ben-teen's is quite so elaborate as ours. The big square 15 x 15 feet parlor is a hospital tent. Doors are cut into the walls opening into the smaller wall tents which are about 9 feet square. These are the sleeping rooms. Single beds leave room in each for small dressing table, trunk, etc. I have two, you will see. In the one nearest the large common room shall have a stove, writing table, etc., sleeping in the one in the rear. All have board floors and carpets. The walls are boarded up to where the roof begins to slope--this outside, and then against the bound walls earth is banked to their tops.

The cantonment was fairly remote. It was 15 miles from the nearest post office, at White Rocks Agency, and about 75 miles from the nearest telegraph, at Price's Station, on the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad. The Mormon settlement of Ashley was the nearest town, about 32 miles to the northeast. The Uintah Reservation lay to the west, and the Uncompahgre Reservation to the south. (See maps, pages 139-140.)
On 23 August 1886, Major Benteen formally assumed command of the cluster of tents that was Port Duchesne. His first priority was to calm potential Indian unrest. This he did without incident in the first days, assigning an infantry detachment under Lieutenant Henry D. Styer to guard the agency headquarters. The Utes from these reservations were expected to oppose the troops, and even though active opposition failed to materialize, they were at first "threatening in their demonstrations and kept the command under constant surveillance. This necessitated large guards from the garrison." Benteen then turned his attention to building the post.

The building process was a fiasco; much-needed supplies were delayed and the troops remained in tents until almost January 1887. Forage, food, and other essential supplies were slow in coming and were exorbitantly costly when they did arrive.

In accordance with frontier tradition, posts were built by "the labor of the troops." Unfortunately, these "large guards" were problematic; they greatly reduced the work force and delayed the construction of the adobe and frame buildings which were to replace the tents. Lumber was provided by two sawmills in the area, but the men's early efforts at making adobe bricks were not successful,
since no one in the command had any experience in this work. There was another cause of delay:

... the slowness attending the delivery of needed stores and material at the post. Carter Station, on the Union Pacific Railway, was first chosen as the point from which the contractor's trains would start. The time allowed him from this point to Fort Duchesne is understood to have been fifteen days. His quickest time was thirteen; while trains conducted by private individuals have made the journey in six days. Some delay was also due to the order in which stores were shipped from Carter to the post, those sent being of no immediate use like doors, window frames, bunk bottoms, shelter tent poles, etc.

Benteen found himself in the same position he had been in on the march from Macon in May 1865, when his troops had started to mutiny over poor supply problems. The difference was that the dependable troops of the 9th Cavalry were not expecting any discharge and did not revolt. They grumbled, naturally, and the 52-year-old post commander found himself once again frustrated by the seeming incompetence of military supply systems.

Benteen had neither training nor experience in military engineering. He later confessed, with exaggerated sarcasm, "that the building of a post without lumber, nails, or other materials, was just a trifle too much for me, I am not up to the trick." He was, of course, at an age when new tricks are not readily learned. It also seems certain that the work of supervising foundation-laying and adobe-making was deeply uncongenial to him, and that as the season advanced, and any prospect of spending
the winter in proper quarters receded and vanished, he became correspondingly more despondent. An officer such as Colonel Grierson—one who found satisfaction in constructive work of this kind—would probably have met the challenge. Benteen, on the other hand, seems to have behaved essentially as if he were commanding a long established post which demanded nothing more from him than routine attention to the details of the military day. He was one of the critics of Crook's choice of site, and spent at least one morning (in late September) riding around the country looking for a new location.

On Saturday, 25 September 1886, a wagon train carrying some of the supplies left behind at Bridger a month before finally arrived at Duchesne. Benteen had been advised that the commanding officer of the wagon train was Lieutenant Harry L. Bailey of the 21st Infantry, and that Bailey had also brought his wife and a new officer for one of the cavalry troops. Accordingly, he ordered Lieutenant John S. Parke to put a gun crew to work erecting a tent for the Baileys. Lieutenant and Mrs. Bailey arrived after retreat (about four o'clock in the afternoon) and were warmly greeted by Benteen and the rest of the garrison. Benteen jokingly told Mrs. Bailey, "Your husband must have a hell of a time with you." Mrs. Bailey laughed and asked what he meant by that remark. Benteen
replied that any woman with her eyes would "make it lively for any man." Violet Norman (Mrs. Benteen's 21-year-old niece who was living with the Benteens) who was also present during the exchange remembered that her aunt's husband had said to Mrs. Bailey "that any woman having eyes such as yours must be a holy terror." Violet was certain that all present thought it was a very witty remark, especially Mrs. Bailey.

Captain Olmstead, one of the cavalry troop commanders, regarded the exchange as insulting. He remembered something else. Benteen, he said,

... then stepped around the corner of the wall tent, not going more than ten feet away from where the ladies were sitting, and urinated on the tent, so that we all heard it. Olmstead got up and left, not knowing what might happen next.

The construction work eventually brought Benteen into collision with two principal citizens at the post. In mid-September the Post Council had appointed George H. Jewett of Sidney, Nebraska, as post trader. Jewett was also awarded a contract to construct public buildings on the site. Captain Jocelyn described the trader: "Mr. Jewett, who is a rustling energetic fellow, has already put up quite a collection of board buildings in a large stock of goods." The trader in turn employed a fellow citizen of Sidney to take charge of the construction work -- John W. Vanderhoof, who was a carpenter by trade. At
the same time, Vanderhoof's son Ed became a clerk at the trader's store. There were other citizens about the post, such as a beef contractor and a "roustabout" in the store; but Benteen had to supply most of the unskilled building labor and only he could make the important decisions concerning the barracks, officers' quarters, and so forth.

Jewett's post trader store was a popular place for the officers of Fort Duchesne. Major Benteen allegedly spent an inordinate amount of time there, drinking. However, prior to 10 October 1886, nobody could recall a specific incidence of drunkenness on Benteen's part, except for the controversial episode with Mrs. Bailey at the tent, which Captain Olmstead attributed to intoxication on Benteen's part. "Some officers felt that Benteen was drunk at the time; others did not but admitted he had been drinking."12

On Sunday night, 10 October 1886, an incident occurred at Jewett's store that convinced those who witnessed it and heard about it that Benteen was "found drunk."13 Based on testimony given several weeks later, there can be little doubt that Benteen had been drinking rather heavily that night. About 11 o'clock that night, one of Jewett's employees came to the tent of Lieutenant Styer and reported that Major Benteen and Lieutenant George R. Burnett of the 9th Cavalry were drunk at the
post trader's. According to Jewett's man, who also ran the store, John Vanderhoof, Benteen, and Burnett had been drinking steadily most of the afternoon and Benteen in particular had been abusive to citizens who came in to trade. These citizens, comprised mainly of Mormons, seem to be the target of Benteen's violent temper. There is no evidence why the major singled out Mormons for his attacks. In his trial at no time did he blame Mormons for his problems. Had the predominant religion in the area been Methodist or Catholic, it is likely Benteen would have taken his wrath out on them. Benteen was not happy with life in general.

[Jewett's man told them] that the store had closed and to hit the breeze or move your freight meaning, I suppose, to leave the tent. Mr. Isaac Cummins had been with him drinking. Col. Benteen seemed to become angry with him towards the evening, and ordered him to leave the tent immediately. Cummins started as though he was going out of the door, and stepped behind a high coal-stove and stopped. The Colonel discovered him, and pointed his finger to him, and said, "There stands the son of a bitch behind the stove." He said, "Boys," speaking to no one specially, "give me a revolver and I'll make the son of a bitch of a Mormon pull his freight." I think Col. Benteen remained that night until about nine o'clock. I could not say positive. I think my son went home with him one evening. I think it was that evening.

At the urging of Vanderhoof's son, Benteen and Burnett agreed to leave the store about nine o'clock. They took the younger Vanderhoof with them as they made a contemptuous inspection of the guards.
At night of the same day, I think it was about ten or eleven o'clock in the evening. I went with him and Lieutenant Burnett to Lieutenant Burnett's quarters. Think of getting home alone, I thought, without being seen by either Colonel Benteen or Lieutenant Burnett, and was called back by the Colonel, and he says, "Wait, Ned, and I will go down to the store again." On starting from Lieutenant Burnett's quarters, we visited the sentry. The Colonel visited the sentry and took me with him. After leaving the sentry, we went to the sentry at another post, next to Post No. 1. The corporal of the guard was called out there, and sent back by Colonel Benteen and then he was called a second time, and the sentry on that post was infantry. The Colonel, at the same time turning to me, said, "You see the difference, Ned, between the Cavalrymen and the Infantry." 

He and Burnett decided to return to the store for some more drinking.

It was then that Ned Vanderhoof sent a runner to Lieutenant Styer to ask for assistance in getting Benteen and Burnett to go home. Summoning the post surgeon, Dr. Robert Benham, Styer plunged in and physically tried to carry the obviously inebriated post commander home. Dr. Benham stated later in the trial,

I told the Colonel I thought he had better go home, but he said that he was the judge of his actions and that he should do just as he pleased. Young Mr. Vanderhoof and myself then took Mr. Burnett to his tent, and put him to bed. I left Mr. Styer to accompany Colonel Benteen. On my return from Lieutenant Burnett's tent, I saw Colonel Benteen lying in the mud at the side of the road—it had been raining all day—and Mr. Styer was trying to get him up. I went up to the Colonel, and told him I thought he had better get out of the wet. He swore at me, said he wouldn't, nobody could make him. I then put my arms under him, and tried to lift him up, but he would not get onto his feet so I dragged him across the road to a dry place, and then went to my own tent.
At length, Benteen stood and said, "Styer, I thank you for your guardianship." He then walked to his own tent unassisted.

During the middle of October, another incident occurred in the store. Benteen had been drinking when Violet Norman and Kate Benteen, Benteen's wife, suddenly walked through the door. John W. Vanderhoof recalled what had happened.

The day that Mrs. Benteen and the young lady came to the store, I was at work in the club-room putting up the shelving that is there with another man or two; the Colonel requested that Mrs. Benteen and the young lady should be shown into the club-room. I then made the remark to the Colonel that I would leave the club-room with the men, but he told them to set down; they objected to sitting down, but wanted him to go home with them right away, asked him to go. His reply was, "I will not go unless you will drink a bottle of ginger-ale with me." They objected to drinking it there, saying they would rather have it sent to their house or residence. He finally prevailed upon them to drink the ale there, and then he went home with them. The day that his wife and the young lady were there, I did not consider him perfectly sober, that is my judgment.

This is the first indication that Benteen's wife was becoming alarmed at the drinking habits of her husband. There is an obvious problem that is surfacing in the Benteen household.

On Thursday, 11 November 1886, Major Benteen sat in the post trader's with Lieutenant Burnett and a civilian doctor named Julius Robertson, drinking ginger ale. The store was filled with customers, mostly nonmilitary
men engaged in various businesses who, for one reason or another, had been given contracts for essential supplies. One of them, a man named Lycurgus Johnson, walked in with Sterling Cotton, sheriff of Uintah County.

M. L. Johnson and myself walked into the Sutler's store. Colonel Benteen was in there, when we got there. I see he was drinking very freely when we went there, and he asked us up to take a drink. He got into quite a quarrel with Mr. Johnson, and used some pretty hard language toward him. After Colonel Benteen had treated several times, Mr. Johnson asked him to drink with him, and throwed out a dollar. The Colonel says, "I believe you denied being a Mormon, Mr. Johnson." Mr. Johnson said, "You are mistaken. I was never brought where I had to deny it." Says he: "You are a goddamned liar, you did deny it to me," and says he, "Some think I came here to fight Indians but I came here to fight Mormons, or to cinch Mormons, or some such expression. I would not be positive as to that." Says he, "I'll make the Star Spangled Banner float over all of your heads before I get through with you." After this, Mr. Johnson and I left the store.

Others left the post trader's with Johnson and Cotton. However, not enough of the despised civilian tradesmen had left to please Benteen. He instructed John Vanderhoof to prepare one of the back rooms so that he and Burnett and Dr. Robertson might eat the noonday meal in privacy. Vanderhoof did so, and in the process of serving the meal, he exchanged words with Benteen. Dr. Robertson later said that Benteen made a remark which evidently irritated Mr. Vanderhoof. Apparently, he mentioned a questionable deal that Jewett, Vanderhoof's boss, had made with another businessman named Lorenzo Hatch.
And while at the table, he asked me why Mr. Jewett had taken Mr. Lorenzo Hatch in partnership in building these buildings here. I told him I did not know that he had, and he said I was a damned liar, I knew all about it. I said to him, "Colonel Benteen, you are mistaken. I never knew of such a thing." He said, "What in the hell is the use of your sitting there and lying in that way? You know that you do." I then told him I had not been in the habit of being talked to in that way, and not to talk in that way any longer, for I should not stand for it.

Lieutenant Burnett reproved Benteen for his language and conduct, asserting that Vanderhoof was only a loyal employee, and furthermore, that he had gone out of his way to fix a meal and place of privacy for the officers. About that time Benteen made a movement in his chair and fell to the ground (there was no floor in the tent). Lieutenant Burnett asked Vanderhoof if he would help the colonel up.

I told them I would if the Colonel requested it, that if he didn't I would not. I was a very little angry at the time. The Colonel turned his face to me then, and ordered me to leave the tent immediately. I did not leave quite as quick as he thought I ought to, and he says, "You damned old gut, ain't you going to get out of here?" He says, "If you do not, I'll have you arrested." I took my hat and left the tent. He was still on the ground when I left. I do not know how long he remained there, or who helped him up. In about twenty minutes, I should judge, I saw them going toward the door of the club-room.

Later, Benteen, feeling somewhat bruised and contrite, sent a clerk, Sam Woolley, after Sheriff Sterling Cotton. When Cotton arrived, Benteen apologized for his previous treatment of the merchant Johnson (and, by implication, Cotton himself) an hour before. Cotton claimed
that Major Benteen was drunk and that at the end of the
apology he began to talk in a rambling manner about
Mormons, asking Cotton about Mr. Johnson's religious
views, and if he was a Mormon.

I told him that he was a good deal like I was—
neither of us was considered a Mormon—didn't belong
to the church—but some of the principles of Mormon-
ism we both advocated. Said he, "Do you want to know
what I think you are?" Says I, "I don't know if I
care." Says he, "I think you are both goddamned Mor-
mons, and the Mormons are a set of goddammed sons of
bitches." At that I jumped and pulled my overcoat
off, and said, "You are a goddamned liar, and you
ain't no gentleman, or you would not talk to me that
way." He then threw his clothes off, down to his
shirt, and threw his suspenders off; he kind of
rolled up his sleeves and said, "Come on, and I'll
let you know whether I am a gentleman or not." We
both started toward each other when Lieutenant
Burnett came up and said, "For my sake, desist."    
Says I, "All right, Lieutenant. Keep him away from
me and I'll leave the room." Says he, "No, you
don't; you are sheriff of that county over there, and
I commander here, and I am going to show you that I
can whip you."22

Cotton, Johnson, and Vanderhoof all united in say-
ing that Benteen had been drunk. Dr. Robertson said that
Benteen was not drunk but that he (Robertson) was drunk.
Lieutenant Truitt, the quartermaster, claimed that he had
seen Benteen drunk one day about the time of the post
trader incident, but could not recall which day it was.
Lieutenant Willich, the adjutant, claimed that he had
handled the post's routine business with Major Benteen
every day and had not noticed that he seemed drunk on 11
November.
When questioned about the incident under oath, none of the other officers assigned to the post could remember anything that had transpired that day. Only Lieutenant Truitt believed that Benteen had been drunk. He could not recall any details concerning a brawl in the post trader's.

In addition to the bad feelings at the post trader's, relations became equally awkward between Benteen and his fellow officers, some of whom took to avoiding him whenever possible. Of course, the members of the garrison staff could not avoid him; and two of the three officers who were at first appointed survived for barely a month. The new appointments were promulgated at the end of September, ostensibly on the grounds that the original selections "... were made without any personal knowledge of each or any of the officers, and it is trusted that in making the changes, no one can feel aggrieved."23

Lieutenant Hearn, the quartermaster, heard that he was being relieved for "connecting" himself with Mr. Jewett in regard to contracts--this was scarcely a week after Jewett had arrived at the post. The quartermaster went to Benteen to demand that the allegation be substantiated or withdrawn. However, Benteen denied that he had used Hearn's name in that connection and stated, in effect, that if he had made the remark he did not remember
it. Hearn was assured that he was simply being replaced by a more experienced officer, and the matter was smoothed over.

On 12 November, Benteen relieved Lieutenant Willis Wittich as adjutant and replaced him with Lieutenant Harry Bailey. He later said that the reason for this was that the Department of the Platte headquarters had sent him instructions to the effect that the positions of post adjutant and post commissary of subsistence could not be held by the same officer when there were sufficient officers to warrant having two different men occupy those positions. Benteen decided that Fort Duchesne had a sufficiency of officers, and left Wittich as commissary of subsistence only. He also claimed that he felt Wittich was a spy:

I was told that Lieutenant Wittich was a spy upon my actions, and that they were constantly holding meetings with Mr. Vanderhoof, Mr. Jewett and others, to get me relieved from the command of the post. Not caring to have a detective upon my staff, I wrote this order, when said to be drunkest, Mr. Vanderhoof says when lying on the floor, for the reasons given. Now although it is not well written, it is written in a manner that no drunken man could do.24

The exact nature of George Jewett's activities at Fort Duchesne were never established. Benteen was positive Jewett was engaged in some kind of skullduggery. He attempted to draw out some evidence of Jewett's conspiracies at his own court-martial, but his questions were
consistently dismissed as irrelevant. His granddaughter later passed on her belief that there were some "inequities at Fort Duchesne that Benteen had attempted to expose" but admitted she knew nothing about the details. She said that the Benteen family always referred to the Utah Territory as "Fort Du Shame."26

In view of the fact that the post was still largely a tent city by late December, the obvious conclusion is that something was indeed wrong. By some means, Jewett had managed to obtain contracts to build wooden houses and public buildings, but the buildings did not go up until after Benteen had been relieved of command. Hiring a post trader as building contractor was not completely unusual on the 19th-century frontier posts, but it was an exception to the rule. Benteen implied that Jewett had used information gleaned from young officers, who were either friendly with him or in his debt, to outbid his rivals. Assistant Surgeon Robert B. Benham testified:

He [Benteen] was also very abusive on those days to certain civilians, amongst other things charging that Mr. Jewett was in "cahoots" with Mr. Hearn, the quartermaster, in the letting of contracts for building the post.27

Benteen, however, never proved such activity, and his one attempt to do so was overruled by senior officers at the trial.
But the embarrassment of seeing a military post still in tents four months after it had been designated as a permanent post cried out for an explanation. General Crook, in Omaha, under some pressure from the Commanding General of the U.S. Army in Washington (General Philip H. Sheridan), decided to find out what was wrong at Duchesne. He sent his inspector general, Major Robert H. Hall of the 22nd Infantry, to Duchesne to investigate and report.

Hall arrived at the post late at night on 29 November. Curiously, he did not pay a courtesy call on the post commander, Major Benteen. In fact, the only inkling Benteen had of his presence was a telegram sent the night before which said simply, "I am here under special instructions from the Dept. Comdr. I am very tired this evening, but shall do myself the honor of reporting to you tomorrow on arriving." The next day, without reporting as promised, Hall proceeded with the regularly scheduled inspection of the new post, a process which consumed the entire morning.

Major Hall arriving there on the night of the 29th of November, the 30th of November being the day for the regular prescribed inspection, which was had, a thorough one being made, left only the afternoon to Major Hall to perform what he was specially sent here to do. Major Hall did not even go through the form of showing me his orders for being at the post of Duchesne at all, and the only means I had of knowing anything about the matter was what I here present.
Benteen, anxious to know about the "special instructions," was kept in the dark. Hall merely told Benteen before leaving the post

... that he did not see how any more could have been done towards building this post than had been done, and the same thing is corroborated by the report of an interview had with him in Salt Lake City by a reporter for a daily newspaper.

Major Hall's official report to General Crook was something else. According to Benteen, it was "simply infamous." It said, in part,

The object of my visit [to Fort Duchesne] was to ascertain what progress had been made in building this new post, and the reasons for the seeming delay in construction. In the officers' quarters, but little has been accomplished. Of the building numbered 5, the foundation is partly laid; of number 7, foundation completed; of number 8, foundation completed and frame up; of number 9, foundation laid and building partially framed. Part of the material for the barracks is on the ground. Of the quartermaster's storehouse, the foundation is laid, frame is up, and building floored. Of the subsistence storehouse, the cellar is excavated, foundation wall almost completed, and building partly framed. Quartermaster's stables, frame partially set up. Quartermaster's shops, frame almost complete, and building partly inclosed. The butcher's shop is almost finished. It is, however, a private affair and has been erected by the beef contractor.

Some fifty thousand adobes have been made. A steam saw-mill has been set up about thirty-five miles northwest from the post, and is sawing out excellent lumber. Until about the 23rd ultimo, the saw-mill at the Uintah Indian Agency was also engaged in sawing lumber for the post. Some building materials, but not much value, have been brought from old Fort Thornburgh, where there still remain about one hundred thousand adobes, said to be of excellent quality.
Probably the principal cause of delay has been the conduct of Major F. W. Benteen, 9th Cavalry, the officer in command. I was informed that he is frequently unfitted for duty through the excessive use of intoxicating liquors, and this for periods of two to three days at a time. During these attacks he is said to be obstinate and unreasonable and so abusive to those about him as to make it impossible to transact any business with him. These attacks it is said have increased in frequency during the last two months, so that he is very often thus disabled.\textsuperscript{32}

The reasons which Major Hall gave for the seeming delay have already been documented: The early need for "large guards"; the initial failure with adobe making; the slowness in delivering materials to the site; and--"probably the principal cause of delay"--the conduct of the officer in command. However, according to Jocelyn's account, the materials brought from old Fort Thornburgh were of much more value than Major Hall's remarks would suggest:

Here [Fort Thornburgh] I find an officer and detachment of 6 men engaged in dismantling the post of everything that can be made of use in building a new one; such as doors, windows, etc., in fact every available stick of timber or bit of lumber. Some 90 wagon loads have already been sent over and there is more to follow. \textsuperscript{33}

Nothing appears to have survived to show how Crook learned of "the seeming delay." Although Vanderhoof wrote a letter concerning the problems which he never sent, there may have been complaints from the citizens of a less formal nature.
It is at least equally probable that the lack of progress was noticed by Major Thaddeus H. Stanton, one of Crook's old friends and sporting companions. At the time Stanton was paymaster at Salt Lake City, and twice he visited the new post to pay the troops. These visits were on 17 September and 21 September. He had also been in Crook's party—doing some fishing—when the department commander had chosen the site in August. Stanton must have known that Crook had not intended to leave the garrison under canvas during the winter, and on his second visit as paymaster he could easily have seen that this was now inevitable.

Major Hall's "infamous" report was dated 7 December 1886. On 18 December, Benteen's regimental commander, Colonel Hatch, arrived at Fort Duchesne and relieved Benteen of command. For the next month, the former commanding officer was in an uncomfortable limbo, technically "on duty" but actually waiting to see whether Hatch could gather enough prima facie evidence to justify a trial. Fort Duchesne had been an unhappy post from the outset, and the uncomfortable business of interviewing potential witnesses, with all the rancor, rumors, and gossip which that entailed, must have added to the unpleasantness of garrison life.
Hatch then proceeded to investigate affairs at the fort, looking specifically for evidence to support Hall's conclusion that Benteen was chronically drunk. Questioning the officers and civilians present, he drew up a list of six specifications, all involving being drunk on duty. These included the 25 September incident with Mrs. Bailey at the tent; drunk on duty on 27 September; the 20 October incident at the post trader's; drunk on duty 10 November; the 11 November "brawl" with Sheriff Cotton; and drunk on duty on 12 November. The three "drunk on duty" specifications on 27 September, 10 November, and 12 November were never supported by any sworn testimony. The charges and specifications were short and simple, but they were also deadly, as a commanding officer was deemed to be on duty at all times and the mandatory sentence for drunkenness on duty was dismissal.

In between the approval of these charges by the department commander and the convening of the court for their trial, yet another inspecting officer arrived at Duchesne. There was not a great deal of admiration between Sheridan and Crook. When Sheridan received word of the difficulties at Fort Duchesne, he sent the Inspector General of the Army "under special instructions." General Absalom Baird reached the post on 21 November 1887 and stayed for two days before returning to the War
Baird, a highly intelligent officer, was held in great esteem in the Army, and the report which he made to Sheridan no doubt influenced the Commanding General's attitude toward the case.

Meanwhile, Benteen was especially mortified that Hatch was the investigating officer.

Now, one in being prosecuted cannot hope that the prosecutor shall be a bosom crony, but at the same time, the spirit of fair play, it seems might have prompted the sending of other than an avowed and bitter enemy of mine to report on my conduct, and I have every reason to know that it was known at the headquarters Department of the Platte that Col. E. Hatch was an enemy of mine, for I know it, and have known it for a length of time, and for Col. Hatch has said, since being sent on this duty that if I got out of this trouble that he intended preferring other charges against me.\textsuperscript{35}

In the meantime, under circumstances never clearly set forth, Benteen was offered a six-month leave of absence. He implied that the offer was semi-official in nature and that it had emanated from General Crook through the paymaster, Major Stanton. (It also could have been inspired by Baird's report to General Sheridan.)

On 3 January 1887, an article appeared in the \textit{Kansas City Times} purporting to come from an unnamed enlisted man at Fort Leavenworth. The article, an important document in the army career of Benteen, is included in Appendix A. Naturally, General Crook, the "department commander" alluded to, was furious. He debited a second charge to Benteen's account:
Conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. In this, Major Frederick W. Benteen, 9th U.S. Cavalry, did, when in command of the Post of Fort Duchesne, Utah, conduct himself in a scandalous manner, in the post trader's store—using obscene and profane language; taking off his clothes, to quarrel with citizens, and exposing his person. This, to the dishonor and disrepute of the military services at Fort Duchesne, Utah, on or about the eleventh day of November, 1886.

On 7 January 1887, just four days after the article appeared, Crook promulgated Special Order No. 2, appointing a court-martial board to meet at Fort Duchesne on 4 February and try Major Frederick W. Benteen, 9th Cavalry, on two charges: Being "found drunk" on six specific occasions and "conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman" on one occasion. The semi-official offer of a six-month leave of absence, never committed to writing, was withdrawn. On 26 January 1887, Colonel Hatch placed Major Benteen under arrest and read the charges to him.
Notes, Chapter 5

1Kennon Diary. 7 August 1886.

2General George Crook's diary, 20 August 1886.

3Jocelyn, 312.

4Major Robert H. Hall, Inspector General, Department of the Platte, 7 December 1886 (in Record Group 98, National Archives).

5Jocelyn, 308.

6Ibid., 3.

7Benteen, Court-Martial Transcript, Exhibit H.

8Ibid., 7.

9Ibid., 52.

10Ibid.

11Jocelyn, 314. This was at the end of October, but the "board buildings" were not part of the military installations.

12Benteen, Court-Martial Transcript, 42.

13Ibid., 5.

14Ibid., 30.

15Ibid., 37.

16Ibid., 18.

17Ibid., 28.

18Ibid., 34.

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19Ibid., 12.
20Ibid., 31.
21Ibid., 32.
22Ibid., 12-13.
23Ibid., Exhibit C.
24Ibid.
26Ibid.
27Benteen, *Court-Martial Transcript*, 18.
28Ibid., 77.
29Ibid., 73.
30Ibid.
31Ibid., 74.
32Hall, 1-2.
33Jocelyn, 311.
34Special Orders No. 6, Headquarters of the Army, 8 January 1887, par. 6; Post Returns for January 1887.
35Ibid.
36Benteen, *Court-Martial Transcript*, 5.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This study, focusing on the first year of Fort Duchesne, and in particular on its first commander, Major Frederick M. Benteen, leaves little doubt that there were several major problems and mistakes that occurred within the first year of its establishment. The first problem arose immediately, occurring in the selection of the commanding officer. There is no evidence that General George Crook, Commanding General of the Department of the Platte, could possibly have known or foreseen that his appointee to command the new fort in eastern Utah would be totally inadequate as a construction commander. It was Benteen's misfortune to be ordered to command a force and to build the post. His own behavior certainly contributed to the difficulties which followed but other factors of incompetence were factors of equal significance.

Major Benteen had absolutely no experience in building or designing. His only experience came in commanding an already well established cavalry unit. In fact, it appears that Benteen behaved as if the post had
been there for years and all he had to do was tend to the normal everyday details of military life.

As it turned out, General Crook made a disastrous mistake in appointing a cavalry officer to construct a post. It not only had a negative effect on Crook, but on Major Benteen, his fellow officers, and all the enlisted men assigned to the post who suffered physical hardship when construction was not completed by the time the cold Uintah Basin winter set in. It should be remembered that the selection of Benteen to construct the fort reflected as much on General Crook's performance as it did on Major Benteen's.

Major Benteen complained about the site chosen for the post. He and possibly some of his staff officers felt it should have been built farther north, closer to the mountains where timber and water were more readily available. It seemed to Benteen that General Crook had arbitrarily chosen the site with little thought or imagination.

Looking at the map of Utah and Colorado, Fort Duchesne is situated on the west bank of the Uinta River, midway between the Uintah and Ouray Reservations, which were the primary reasons for establishing a new fort. (See map, page 140.) After visiting the actual location, it appears to be a decent site, aside from the lack of
timber for building. A site on the Duchesne River would probably have proven equally suitable, since the terrain and amount of water are approximately the same.

There is no evidence that General Crook had anything in mind other than the construction of a much-needed fort to serve the Uintah and Ouray/Uncompahgre Reservations. It also appears that at this early date he did not select Major Benteen to command the new post as a means of "getting even" for his poor showing at the Battle of the Rosebud. Advancement in the military during the 1880s and since the Civil War was by vacancy only. When a position became vacant due to death, advancement, or retirement, the most senior officer on the regimental roster was promoted to fill the vacancy. Benteen was promoted to Major of the 9th Cavalry as a vacancy arose. He was the senior officer at Fort Duchesne and thus the commanding officer of the fort.

Benteen at no time blamed General Crook for the Little Big Horn disaster, only George A. Custer. No doubt, however, that Crook wanted to impress his superior, General Sheridan, with a massive show of force against the Indians. Hence, his unusual order to Major Benteen dividing his command in order to advance toward Fort Duchesne at a faster pace. There was no reason to advance at such a quick pace. Benteen was the innocent victim of
a man who was predisposed on improving his tarnished image in the eyes of his superior, and losing his nickname, "Rosebud George," not necessarily on revenge against Benteen.

By today's standards, awarding a contract to the post trader to construct only public buildings on a selected site for a fort is highly unusual, especially since the construction of the military sections of the post was left to untrained military personnel. However, this was apparently not unknown in the 1880s, although it was not typical. It appears that the post trader at Fort Duchesne immediately constructed some sort of temporary wooden structures; curiously, however, the permanent buildings were not completed until Benteen was relieved of duty. Needless to say, the post trader would have been anxious to have the public buildings constructed as fast as possible in order to begin selling his mounting inventory of supplies.

On the other hand, it seems likely that government workers, specifically cavalry and infantry officers, would prefer to spend most of their days in the post trader store rather than building a fort, at least until the fall months of October and November arrived and the weather turned freezing cold. It seems increasingly clear that if General Crook had appointed a commander who had a
background in engineering or some related field rather than an officer more interested in garrisoning a post than constructing a fort, Duchesne would have had government buildings well under way in the fall and completed by the time snow fell in the Uintah Basin. Further, had Benteen been on friendly terms with the post trader and his employees instead of constantly abusing them, he probably would have had at least some cooperation during the critical construction months.

Inexperience as a construction commander of Fort Duchesne was not the primary reason that Frederick Benteen was relieved of command. It was his drinking problem. There is no evidence that any one event caused his thirst for liquor. His bladder problem as he rode toward Fort Duchesne in August 1886 has been discussed. Another medical incident occurred earlier in 1886. During duty as post range officer at Fort McKinney, Benteen was carried on the regimental and post returns as "sick in quarters" between 17 March and 23 June 1886. It could have been the same bladder problem or neuralgia that he later had.

Another question arises: If Benteen's health was worsening, why didn't he consider retirement? He had more than 20 years of active military service. He was eligible for a more comfortable life than what he was facing in Fort Duchesne, Utah. It appears he wanted to go on and
not give up his military life and not give up his drinking.

Again, by today's standards, a commander who spent most of his time in the officers' mess or trader store, as in this case, would quickly be relieved of duty. But in the 1880s, drinking was more or less commonplace among army personnel, who spent their idle time in lonely outposts throughout the vast stretches of the West in places where alcohol was freely available. Had Major Benteen spent his off-duty hours drinking socially with his fellow officers and other influential citizens assigned to Fort Duchesne, he might well have survived as commander.

Instead, he chose to avoid his problems and waste away the hours drinking, sometimes for two and three days at a time. He was totally unreasonable and abusive to his fellow officers and enlisted men, as well as civilian personnel, military wives, and generally anyone he came in contact with when he was inebriated. In effect, Benteen completely lost control of his command at Fort Duchesne and was rightfully relieved by his regimental commander.

At this point in the brief history of Fort Duchesne, Major Benteen might well have survived a court-martial, had not the previously mentioned article (see Appendix A) appeared in the Kansas City Times purporting to have come from a discharged member of the 9th Cavalry.
This letter sealed the fate of Benteen. At no time in his life did he ever admit to writing this letter. However, this was not the first communication of this type that had come from the hand of Benteen during his career. In February 1868 a letter that scathingly criticized Custer's role in the Battle of the Washita appeared in two major Eastern newspapers. It bitterly attacked the method and strategy he used during the battle and demonstrated the indifference Custer showed his fallen men after the battle had ended. When Custer was shown the article, he knew it had to have been written by one of his officers. Benteen, recognizing the article as a letter he had written to a friend, quickly acknowledged to Custer that it was his. It is probable that Benteen never intended this letter for publication.

On the other hand, letters written to his wife and acquaintances after the Little Big Horn disaster might well have been targeted by Benteen for newspaper publication. These letters, extremely critical of Custer's leadership and his disobedience in carrying out orders he had been given by his commanding officer, General Terry, were the product of Major Benteen's bitter hatred toward Custer. But in this case, public sentiment was with George Armstrong Custer. Editors were hardly interested in petty complaints, internal bickering, and jealousies
from Custer's subordinates, especially in 1876, only a week before the nation's 100th anniversary. The Little Big Horn was a tragic disaster in the eyes of most Easterners, and nothing could sway their opinion of a national hero such as Custer. Only in recent years have historians taken a more realistic view of Custer's actions at the Little Big Horn.

Keeping these two letters, knowingly written by Benteen, in mind, it follows that he probably wrote his own infamous "death knell" to yet another friend in Kansas City. It is highly unlikely an enlisted man would understand and be able to articulate some of the fine points in the letter, such as the irregularity of the departmental commander reaching the site of the proposed fort, quickly naming it, then leaving almost as quickly for Fort Bridger. The letter goes on to assert that a much more desirable spot for the post would have been 14 miles to the north, near the foot of the Uinta Mountains where the water is cool and fish are available throughout the year. A common cavalry soldier probably would not have known of the factors that are involved in locating and planning a new fort. Overall, the letter does not appear to be the normal grumbling typical of military personnel.
Finally, an enlisted man would hardly be interested in an internal investigation of the commanding officer, other than possibly to discuss and transmit the everyday rumors that plague all military installations. However, this particular investigation was much more secretive than circulating rumors would indicate. No enlisted personnel could have possibly known the details of the investigation, the length of stay, questions asked of officers, and scope of the audit. This information had to have come from Benteen.

The officers reporting to Major Benteen would have known of the investigation and other details; however, it is highly unlikely that they would have written a letter posing as an enlisted man.

That the investigation was warranted was no longer a viable question. The only legitimate complaint the commander might have had was about the method chosen to conduct the audit, in that the inspector made no formal call on Major Benteen, other than a telegram sent the night before promising an interview with the commander the following morning. This telegram, incidentally, was not kept.

The mysterious letter closed with a harangue against the Mormons, calling them the biggest liars in the country, blaming them for conspiring with the inspector
against Benteen, and in general blaming Mormons for many of his problems. It is a known and unquestioned fact that Commander Benteen despised the Mormons, constantly decrying and disparaging any member of the Mormon faith with whom he came in contact.

It is possible that some of the enlisted men did not get along with their Mormon neighbors. However, although there is no mention of any particular problems between the soldiers and the Mormons, at least this early in the fort's history, there is ample evidence of perpetual bickering between Benteen and the Mormons located in and around Fort Duchesne.

General Crook, apparently still anxious to redeem himself in the eyes of General Sheridan, because of his conduct concerning his campaign against Geronimo while he was commanding officer at the Department of Arizona, felt that something had to be done quickly at Fort Duchesne, hence the audit by the inspector general. The inspection was brief, lasting only two days. However, the subsequent report was anything but brief. It gave a lengthy, detailed account of Major Benteen's actions for the past four months, since the post was established. Once the report reached General Crook, he had no alternative but to relieve Benteen. He ordered Colonel Hatch, an old nemesis of Benteen's, to proceed with affairs at the fort.
There is no information given in any source materials on why Colonel Hatch was chosen to relieve and then draft a list of charges against Comander Benteen. No doubt General Crook knew of Hatch's apparent dislike for Benteen and felt he would give no quarter on gathering evidence for a court-martial, which Crook obviously felt was sorely needed.

The sequence of events seems quite clear. Benteen drinks; the construction of the post falls behind; Major Hall investigates in November; Colonel Hatch investigates in December; the Kansas City Times article appears in January, as a reaction to affairs at Fort Duchesne, not as the cause of the trial which follows in February. If Benteen had stayed sober and got on with the work of construction, there would have been no investigation, no trial, and perhaps no article in the Kansas City Times.
APPENDIX A

ANONYMOUS LETTER TO KANSAS CITY TIMES

3 JANUARY 1887
The recent assignment of Colonel Edward Hatch, 9th Cavalry, to the command at Fort Duchesne, Utah, has been the cause of more or less gossip among the officers and men at this post. All kinds of rumors have been circulating as to this mismanagement in the location of the post and the administration of its affairs by those in authority. It was also reported that the supply departments of the Department of the Platte were the cause of much suffering among the troops stationed thereat. Matters kept going from bad to worse until it was finally determined to send an inspector to the post, investigate the conditions of affairs and report results. This culminated in directing Colonel Hatch to report to General Crook for instructions and his departure for Duchesne where he is now in command.

A few days ago a member of the 9th Cavalry belonging to one of the troops stationed at Duchesne arrived here, having been discharged from the service by expiration of term. While in conversation with him, the Times correspondent, who noticed that he was quite an intelligent man, proceeded to ask him for such information about affairs at Duchesne either well posted or able to tell a pretty good story. If what he avers is true the matter should certainly be thoroughly investigated by the proper authorities and the blame placed where it properly belongs.

"The United States government," said this discharged soldier, "is noted for the bungling manner in which its agents transact the business placed in their charge, but I honestly believe that in the establishment of that post the army has outdone itself in that respect. From the time the orders were received at Forts McKinney and Sidney [Fort Steele], up to the time of my departure from Duchesne, red tape has ruled supreme and with an iron hand, while the indifference of department headquarters and incompetency of the department staff has exceeded anything heretofore heard of."

"When did you start for the point where the post is situated?"

"August 2 the order was received at McKinney and we were obliged to pack up and be on the road by August 4. The packing of all the property was poorly done, causing the loss of hundreds of dollars' worth of public and private property. The troops had not time to weigh a single package and couldn't properly mark any of them as we
didn't know where we were going. But we got off on time, and after a pleasant march reached Rock Creek where we expected to halt a day for a breathing spell and get into a little better shape."

"Did you?"

"No sir. We there found an order awaiting us to come on at once to Fort Bridger. An agent of the quartermaster's department was at Rock Creek to load the command. He put us aboard the cars in such a way, mixing up the companies and headquarters, that we wasn't straightened when I left there two weeks ago. The transportation furnished us by the Union Pacific Railroad was the worst I have seen in the service, and I have been in it a good many years. For two large companies of cavalry, its officers and their wives, this road furnished three small, dingy and filthy emigrant cars. Old, and so dirty we had to clean them out before we could enter them at all. But this railroad is noted for being the meanest road to everybody in the United States, and this meanness seems to have permeated the whole corps of officials.

"On reaching Curtis Station we were rushed off that same night eleven miles to Fort Bridger where we expected to have a chance to rest. But no! Here we met the department commander who started us out for Duchesne before we could supply ourselves with the necessaries. We did draw rations, but were short of everything else, even forage, not having sufficient wagons. The companies of the 21st Infantry from Fort Sidney had started three days ahead of us, and we were told we must overtake them, and this over a mountain trail where infantry can make better time than cavalry.

"One day orders were received from the department commander to divide the cavalry and send one company ahead faster, as trouble was expected. Had there been trouble with the Indians, there would not have been a man left to tell the story. The department commander pushed ahead so rapidly in his ambulance, overtaking the infantry and making them march 50 miles the last day into Duchesne 32 of it without water. These troops were so exhausted when camp was reached that had there been an attack the Indians would have killed every man of them without firing a shot. One day behind the infantry came one cavalry company and still a day behind this came Major Benteen and one company of cavalry and this over a mountain road and through canyons where these small detachments could have been literally eaten up by the Indians had they so chosen.
Indians and citizens laughed at such a march and asked us if we had lost our senses.

"The department commander reached the site of the present post one afternoon, raised his hand and said, 'Here's Fort Duchesne,' and by sunrise next morning was well on his way back to Fort Bridger, obeying in this thorough [?] manner his orders to locate a new post. It evidently mattered not to him how uncomfortable the sight might be. He well knew he would not have to be stationed there. So, like most army posts, we found ourselves located in the most dreary spot in the whole section of that desert country. Had the post been established fourteen miles up the river to the foot of the mountains, a beautiful site would have been obtained.

"The post, as now located, is on the Uinta River, a large stream of water so warm in summer that fish are not found in it during the season. The formation of the country is such that the camp gets the benefit of all the wind when it blows, which it does constantly in the fall, picking up the alkali dust, as fine as flour, covering everything with it. The sand is so fine that it sifts through the tent canvas so that the troops get it not only thoroughly ground into their skin, but have to eat no small amount of it with their meals.

"From the rosy promises made us at Fort Bridger by the department commander and his staff, we supposed that when we reached the spot where the post is now located, supplies would be promptly shipped us so we could begin making ourselves comfortable. The march from Fort McKinney had been so hurried that we left that post as light as possible--one suit of clothes and a blanket to a man, and barely tentage sufficient to cover the command, and a portion of this had to be left at Bridger for want of transportation. But we tried to be happy, thinking that thirty days at the outside would see us supplied.

"Day after day went by, and nothing came. We were evidently forgotten. The officers made the necessary requisitions at Bridger again as soon after getting to Fort Duchesne as possible. Pleading, begging and sharp letters were written by the post commander demanding that his troops be supplied but to no purpose. The days were long and hot, thermometers reaching ninety-six in the shade, while the nights were so cool that ice formed in
our tents in the water buckets, making a change of sixty degrees in twenty-four hours.

"Men suffered for want of sufficient bedding, while the hard work we were compelled to perform soon wore out the one suit of clothes and we looked more like ragamuffins than soldiers of such a government as ours, and even up to the time when I left--less than two weeks, with snow on the ground--the company property was not all received, nor had the quartermaster's department clothing sufficient to issue to the troops.

"But if the garrison couldn't be supplied, we had something to laugh at. The first teams that arrived had on shelter tent poles, an article that is never used. The next teams brought street lamps. Then came a train loaded with doors and window frames, but not a nail, a pick or axes or helve, and we were compelled to wait for these things for months. Good mules were sent us, but not a shoe had the post quartermaster been able to get for them. He has done the best he could, but had to work them night and day till the feet of some of them were worn to the quick and liable to die from that cause alone. When I left the blacksmiths were at work cutting up wagon tires and iron bunks to get iron to make shoes and save the mules. Their horses are barefoot and unable to take to the field at all. Not a veterinary instrument or pound of medicine has been received at the post.

"After months of delay, contracts were let. All the stoves at the post are coal burners, as the only fuel contracted for is wood, and rotten cottonwood at that to save $2 a cord, when the extra $2 would have purchased cedar. There is no earthly reason why the quartermaster's department should not have contracted for coal, there being plenty of it in that section. Even the post office department has gone back on the garrison and no mail route that can be depended on; the government being too poor to pay what it is worth to bring it in from Price's Station, their nearest railroad station. It is left to the Union Pacific Railroad to send it in from Green River, 200 miles over a bad road and by an unreliable courier who makes the trip or not, just as he pleases.

"There is plenty of fine timber about forty miles from there, but the only sawmills the government has sent them [are] old and wornout ones, not worth the price of getting them into that country. One of them has already blown up, killing one man and injuring two others. The other is at a standstill, it too having broken down. The
troops are still in tents. Had the quartermaster's department done its duty the men would have been in quarters by the end of October.

"As you may know, such a state of affairs could not last long without complaints being made by someone. A scapegoat for all this had to be found. Major Hall, 22d Infantry, the acting inspector general of the department, was sent out to inspect and investigate. He came there and stayed a few days, made no investigation whatever, that is he did not ask a single question of an officer or man, as far as the garrison has been able to find out. He returned to Omaha and, it is said, made a most disgraceful report against the commanding officer. He may have obtained his information from Mormon citizens on the road back, and anyone who has anything to do with Mormons knows them to be the biggest liars in the country and to have their ill will is really a recommendation for an honest man.

"Were I in Major Benteen's place I would not rest until the whole matter was thoroughly investigated not by any whitewashing board but by an officer who is not dependent upon favors from department headquarters.

"What I have related," concluded the soldier, "covers the whole matter and if it will be the cause of stirring up a hornet's nest I feel that a duty has been performed toward my suffering comrades at Fort Duchesne."
APPENDIX B

MAPS OF BENTEEN IN THE CIVIL WAR,
THE WASHITA BATTLEFIELD, ON THE SOUTHERN AND
NORTHERN PLAINS, THE UTE WAR, AND
THE SIOUX WAR OF 1876
Figure 1. Benteen in the Civil War.
Figure 2. Washita Battlefield Perspective.
Figure 3. Benteen on the Southern Plains.
Figure 4. Benteen on the Northern Plains.
Figure 6. The Sioux War of 1876.
APPENDIX C

MAPS OF FORT DUCHESNE AND
SURROUNDING AREA
Figure 9. Ouray and Uintah Indian Reservation, 1886.
APPENDIX D

PLAN OF OFFICERS' QUARTERS
FORT DUCHESENE, UTAH
PLAN OF OFFICERS' QUARTERS

FORT DUCHESNE, UTAH

Figure 10.
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A History of Fort Duchesne, Utah, and the
Role of Its First Commanding Officer,
Frederick W. Benteen

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the events that occurred during the first five months of Fort Duchesne, Utah, between August and December 1886. The primary focus is on Frederick William Benteen, one of the heroes who fought and survived the Battle of the Little Big Horn. The three Ute tribes--Uintah, White River, and Uncompahgne--are also discussed as they pertain to Fort Duchesne.

A difficulty arose the first day a site was chosen at Fort Duchesne. Surprisingly, it did not involve the Indians, but the post commander. The central problem is what caused the long delay in building the fort. This study presents several possible theories as to why troops were still billeted in tents during the winter months of December and January. These include Major Benteen's inexperience as a construction engineer commander and his insatiable drinking habit he had acquired.

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