

“Your Affectionate Son, Robinson”
American Expansionism and the Life of Captain
Abraham Robinson Johnston, 1815-1846

Winner of the 2005 Milton Fintzelberg Memorial Award

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“I trust I may yet have many opportunities of meeting you again, but should I be denied that satisfaction, I trust I shall bear in mind the good you have done for me, and ever strive to imitate your example, and, pray that in leaving this world I may leave behind me so good a name.”

Abraham Robinson Johnston to father, John Johnston, July 30, 1845¹

Captain Abraham Robinson Johnston of the First U. S. Dragoons was the first casualty in the Battle of San Pasqual, fought between the U. S. and *Californio* forces on December 6, 1846. Serving in the Army of the West under the command of General Stephen Watts Kearny, he and his fellow soldiers traveled 2,000 miles from Fort Leavenworth to obtain western territories from Mexico. Johnston remarked in a letter to his father that he hoped to see the Pacific Ocean, mentioning that he found San Diego, in particular the area around Warner’s Ranch, to be “a most enchanting sight.” His death, at the age of thirty-one, cut short his reflections. A series of letters and a gravestone remain the only physical evidence that he lived and died.²

Johnston’s correspondence, dating from 1830 to 1846, lifts the shroud that for one-hundred and sixty years has concealed this idealistic and heretofore “unknown” soldier. The letters offer compelling views of frontier military life as well as elucidating opinions of an articulate soldier caught in the whirlwind of history—from Indian removal and expansionism to slavery and national politics. Additionally, they afford a glimpse into an intimate and enduring father-son relationship that transcended death. By elevating Captain Johnston from the ranks of “expendable obscurity,” the letters may help Americans and San Diegans, in particular, appreciate the personal costs associated with nineteenth-century American expansionism. At a minimum, Robinson’s life serves as a symbol for his and subsequent generations who served in the army but lacked the voice and education to articulate their thoughts and experiences to an indifferent and complacent society.³

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The San Pasqual Valley, southeast of Escondido, was the site of one of the bloodiest battles in the U.S. effort to win California from Mexico on December 6, 1846. ©SDHS FEP #872.

Captain Abraham Robinson Johnston's Life

Little is known of Robinson's early life. He was born on May 23, 1815, in Upper Piqua, Ohio, one of fifteen children born to John and Rachel Johnston. His father was a respected sage and ardent adventurer who helped settle the Old Northwest Territory. An immigrant from Ballyshannon, County Donegal, Ireland, who was raised in Pennsylvania, the elder Johnston worked initially in 1793 as a civilian contractor who supplied the troops of General "Mad" Anthony Wayne. After the Battle of Fallen Timbers, Johnston returned to Pennsylvania, finding employment as a copyist for the state Supreme Court clerk. In 1802, he eloped with sixteen-year-old Rachel Robinson, a pious and devoted Quaker. Together they sought a new life in the burgeoning frontier of the Old Northwest Territory where Johnston worked from 1802 to 1853 as an Indian Agent for the U.S. Government, a position that placed him in the forefront of the day's leading issue: the dispossession of Indians. It also afforded him the opportunity to interact with key military and political leaders, including Daniel Boone and General William Henry Harrison.⁴

The young Robinson arrived at West Point in July 1830, having turned fifteen years old two months earlier. His initial foray into military training was less than stellar. Robinson's age, coupled with his primitive education, left him unprepared for the rigorous educational and disciplinary standards introduced by Superintendent Brevet Major Sylvanus Thayer.⁵ Robinson ranked seventy-fourth out of eighty-seven class members in mathematics and eighty-second in French, and committed forty offenses resulting in ninety-eight demerits. The elder Johnston admonished his son, declaring it imperative that he "rectify" the

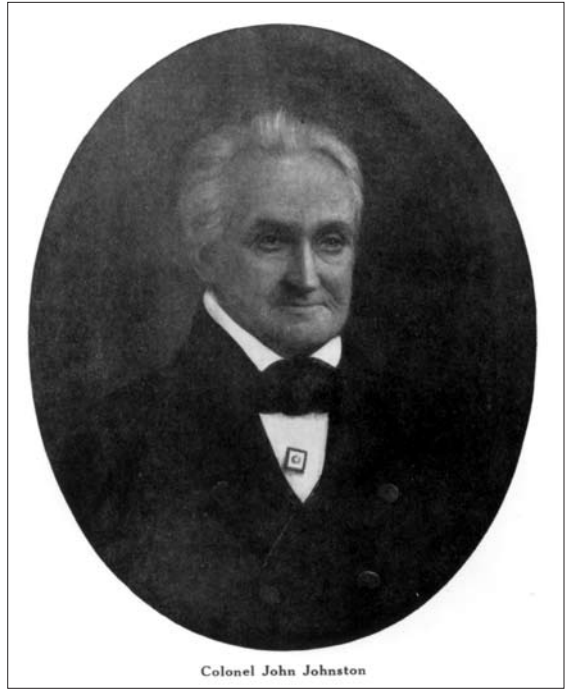
situation. They were not wealthy and he had hoped one of his sons would be educated so they could lead a more fruitful life. "Make your calculations for going through a regular course at West Point . . ." the elder Johnston wrote. "May you my son prove to be everything that I wish you and in your mature years be ranked among the publick [sic] men, the patriots and sages of your country."⁶ Johnston emphasized that very few individuals were permitted as many advantages in life; it was solely up to Robinson whether or not he became "a man of some distinction in the world."⁷

Despite his father's admonishments, Robinson had to repeat his freshman year, becoming a member of the class of 1835.⁸ As Robinson began to understand the importance the family placed on him earning a military commission, his academic performance improved.

⁹ This awareness undoubtedly played a significant role in his successive accomplishments as well as suppressing news that would derail expectations. In late 1834, and anticipating the rapidly approaching June graduation, the elder Johnston congratulated Robinson on his fine work, emphasizing that "soon you will be done there and enter upon a new scene of operations."¹⁰ At his graduation, he ranked twenty-eighth in a class of fifty-four.

Robinson earned a commission as a Brevet Second Lieutenant in the newly formed First U.S. Dragoons.¹¹ The largest branch of the antebellum army was the infantry, with a majority of units stationed at the leading edge of America's frontier. The Plains Indians referred to the soldiers derogatorily as "walk-a-heaps," due to their inability to maneuver and fight effectively. The adeptness of Indians on horses constantly hampered the seemingly moribund infantry troops. After finally overcoming persistent bureaucratic reluctance, on March 2, 1833, Congress authorized the creation of a quick action striking force. This mounted regiment called "dragoons" was the first cavalry to be part of the Regular Army since 1815.¹²

The dragoons' main mission was to patrol the expansive region and secure American hegemony.¹³ During Robinson's era, this meant protecting settlers traveling toward the Oregon Territory, upholding Indian treaty obligations and, until 1845, monitoring the heated border between the United States, the independent Republic of Texas and a revengeful Mexico.¹⁴



Colonel John Johnston
John Johnston, ca. 1850s. Johnston mourned the death of his son, Captain Abraham Robinson Johnston, at the Battle of San Pasqual. He worked to persuade the Army to return his son's remains to Piqua, Ohio. Courtesy of the Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal, Cincinnati Historical Society Library.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in cursive. The text reads "Your affectionate son" on the first line and "Robinson" on the second line.

Captain Abraham Robinson Johnston wrote numerous letters to his father, describing the conditions of soldiers on the western frontier. He signed his letters, "your affectionate son, Robinson." Colonel John Johnston Papers, Letter #234, November 12, 1844. Courtesy of the Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal, Cincinnati Historical Society Library.

When Robinson reported for duty at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the first full-scale defensive strategy for the frontier was underway in earnest. The military's overall plan consisted of positioning garrisons along a "military road" that buffered white settlements from Indian Territory. Throughout the 1820s and 1840s, differing opinions within the War Department over location of the posts and relative troop strength delayed the strategy's full implementation until the eve of the U. S.-Mexican War. By then, the chain of exterior posts included Fort Wilkins (Upper Peninsula of Michigan), followed by Fort Snelling (Minnesota), Fort Leavenworth (Kansas), Fort Scott (Kansas), Fort Smith (Arkansas), and finally, Fort Jessup (Louisiana), in the South. The main cache of men and supplies was located in St. Louis at Jefferson Barracks, a central point from where frontier posts were replenished. The exterior posts were not only launching pads for dragoons and infantry troops, but served as a safe harbor for settlers under attack, and as a means of protecting Indians uprooted and forced to migrate from the East.¹⁵

White encroachment onto "new" Indian lands on the frontier concerned military leaders. To uphold the U.S. Government's treaty obligations, the military's senior leadership insisted on another disposable but adequate restraining force in areas located deep in the interior. The far-forward posts were not elaborately constructed or considered permanent. Usually, they amounted to little more than sod, log or adobe huts, and lacked any semblance of "modern" conveniences.¹⁶ Several outposts were constructed, eventually including Fort Towson (Oklahoma) and Fort Washita (Oklahoma) on the Red River, Fort Gibson (Oklahoma) on the Arkansas River, as well as one near the Kansas River, and along the Missouri River at Table Creek. The military viewed these outposts as the most important defenses in the West, a bulwark against aggressive whites and newly arrived Indians from the East.¹⁷

Robinson's frontier life was considerably different from fellow officers headquartered in the vastly more refined East. Loneliness, exacerbated by weeks if not months of inactivity, weighed heavily on the minds of many frontier officers. With the exception of the occasional raid, a patrol into the hinterlands, or hunting expedition, most of the soldiers' time was relegated to the mundane routine of garrison duty. Expeditions away from the posts consisted of rigorous riding and monotonous marching over desolate lands in capricious weather.¹⁸

After completing temporary recruiting duty in Boston, Robinson rejoined his company newly assigned to Fort Gibson in Arkansas Territory. His earlier wish "not to see Fort Gibson again" had fallen on deaf ears.¹⁹ As he wrote his father, the men "exhibited quiet signs of joy when I arrived, as they have been a good deal knocked about since I left." The whole unit was "badly off," he wrote, "living in the worst quarters imaginable and my company horses are actually in so bad a stable that I fear some morning to find them all crushed in [illegible]." To make

matters worse, only thirty-nine of sixty-eight men in his company owned horses "fit for service."²⁰

Robinson's primitive surroundings and tedious inactivity did not go unnoticed. In late November 1840, Robinson was assigned to temporary duty in Baltimore, allowing sister Rebecca to chidingly poke fun at his situation. "I think it is much easier to become accustomed to the luxuries of appetite and ease of the eastern states, than it is the deprivations of the West. What think you, Brother Bob which would you prefer Fort Gibson, or Baltimore City with its oysters and its pretty women . . . ?" Rebecca offered her brother poignant reminiscences about growing up together in the country, and reflecting on the bounty of the fall season. "Would you not like to be at our old house at this season, the most delightful in the whole year, and then it is the season of plenty, of cider and apple butter," she wrote, "and all other comforts connected with a life in the country."²¹ Recalling the numerous "seasons of plenty" must have crossed young Robinson's mind frequently.

One historian described "the antebellum West as a sportsman's paradise," because officers spent as much time "hunting, fishing, gambling, and racing horses as they did on military duties."²² Robinson supplemented monotonous garrison life with frequent hunting expeditions, especially for indigenous animals. "Your glowing description of prairie life and the sport you have has quite put me in the notion of visiting the far west . . .," wrote brother William Johnston. "It must be glorious sport to one of your disposition to run down the old buffaloes and then the pleasure of catching those prairie dogs is beyond the conception of such a quiet sort of a being as myself."²³ To his father, Robinson described hunting prairie hens or "grouse," as he referred to them, as a very exciting sport.²⁴

A benefit to junior officers like Robinson stationed on the frontier was the ability to exercise direct command and the flexibility to make decisions without constant field-grade supervision and bureaucratic review. The authority to train and employ a company-sized unit provided Robinson with personal and professional satisfaction.

In one instance in late 1844, Robinson commanded an expedition into the Wichita Mountains—the southwestern limit of the United States—to retrieve two white boys supposedly kidnapped a year earlier in Texas by Wichita Indians. A highpoint



Captain Robinson Johnston drew a sketch of the Pawnees that he encountered along a branch of the Red River in a letter to his father. Colonel John Johnston Papers, Letter #234, November 12, 1844. Courtesy of the Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal, Cincinnati Historical Society Library.

of the unsuccessful rescue mission was viewing Pawnee Peaks, which Robinson described as being 700 feet above ground level and having “a picturesque appearance rising directly out of the prairie without any gradual slope.” While the expedition participated in a hunt that netted fifteen buffalo, Robinson wrote disappointingly that he chased one, “but he jumped off a bank 8 or ten feet into the rocky bed of a creek and my horse would not follow him so I lost him.” In addition to the profusion of buffalo, Robinson stated that “deer and turkies [sic] were at every turn—in the cross timber plenty of bear.”²⁵

One day on the same expedition, while encamped alongside a branch of the Red River, thirteen Indians whom Robinson identified later as Pawnees, rode into camp. He wrote his father the following description accompanied by a detailed etching:

They rode into our camp (13 of them) dressed in their best, each with a fine buffalo robe wrapped around their loins leaving the upper parts of their bodies either naked or covered with some kind of shirt. Their hair was most worn long parted in front and platted in ques [sic] below the neck. These ques were ornaments with silver broaches. The kind most one made long by splicing it with buffalo hair so that it reached the ground. The appearance of one was so much like a woman that I won a bottle of cider off the agent on a wager on the point—he contending that it certainly was a woman. They wore a profusion of white beads and white wampum and on each arm the better dressed had rings of brass wire of the thickness of a goose quill then afforded their standard of value and ‘regulated their currency’—seven of them were worth a mule.²⁶

To ensure the Pawnees were not concealing the boys, Robinson and his men ventured into their village a few days later. “While they are famous for thieving as all wild Indians are . . . these fellows,” Robinson exclaimed, “exceed the wolf for sneaking.” Despite his initial, unflattering opinion, Robinson was impressed with their living accommodations.

The village covered about two acres or more. The lodges were built of poles and thatched all over with long prairie grass, which at the distance of a half mile presented the appearance of hay stacks. A hole or two was left for a door and an opening at the top for smoke to escape. Their sleeping arrangements were very neat, they had made screens of long weeds dried when green and with these each bed was rendered private. . . .²⁷

During this era, advancement in rank was based on seniority. Junior officers were forced to wait until those with more service time had died, resigned, or were promoted. Elevation to the grade of captain depended on whether vacancies existed within each officer’s respective regiment. Transferring to another unit was discouraged. Unfortunately, for a newly commissioned lieutenant assigned to a regiment with high morale and low turnover, he often remained the most junior officer for an extended period.²⁸

In 1845, Robinson celebrated ten years of military service. While he had gained valuable skills in commanding men and had learned the nuances of dealing with Indians and white settlers, he was disappointed that he remained a lieutenant. "Some of my class mates are out of sight above me," Robinson lamented. "It is true others are far below but they belong to the Artillery where promotion has always been slow." Robinson informed his father that if the selection process were left to the military he would be successful, but because politicians had become involved—including, in some instances, the direct intervention of President Polk—the whole dynamic had changed.²⁹

The promotion issue became moot once war with Mexico became a certainty. In May 1846, Colonel Kearny ordered Robinson—still a lieutenant—to leave Fort Gibson and report to Fort Leavenworth. After what Robinson described as a "hard march of 220 miles in six days over the prairies . . . in some of which water was scaries [sic] and flies like swarms of bees" he assumed the duties of regimental adjutant.³⁰ His long wait for promotion was over. The assignment not only assured Robinson of a promotion, it confirmed his professional competency and future military success. Colonel Kearny had assumed command of the Army of the West, consisting of 300 dragoons and 1,000 Missouri volunteers, and been ordered to march to Santa Fe and, after securing the area for the United States from Mexico, proceed to California via the Gila Trail. In preparing the regiment for its arduous and now legendary march through the Southwest, Robinson wrote that he was "as busy as a bee." While he expressed excitement and felt confident in the expedition's success, he wrote his father, "I am far from thinking it a holliday [sic] adventure."³¹

For bachelor officers other issues occupied their minds besides the slow rate of promotion. The lack of both the comforts of civilization and the chance of marrying a "suitable" woman who could adapt to the rigors of military life were conundrums that undoubtedly preoccupied spare moments. Robinson had decided years earlier that his "limit of celibacy" would be his thirtieth birthday. A few months before his self-imposed deadline, Robinson's frustration with military life reached its climax. In early 1845, he tried to obtain leave to travel east "to get a wife," but upon further reflection, coupled with a bit of self-doubt, he wrote his father stating that Fort Washita "would not be so attractive as other places . . ." and doubted whether a woman would want to live in such a remote and desolate place.³²

Word from home that brother John had married not only caused personal angst but forced Robinson to question his chosen career. "I almost envy him," Robinson wrote his father, "the prophet of a happy life settled in one spot, when I contrast it with the various fortunes of a soldier. . . . Thus always shut out from civilization. The idea of getting married and surrounding oneself with the ties that bind one to places is almost chimerical." Robinson became so despondent, he admitted having "serious thoughts of seeking some other calling" in which he could be exempt "from so uncertain and controlling [sic] influence. . . ." Upon further reflection, however, Robinson reasoned that despite "all the fluctuation of fortune," the certainty of employment outweighed all personal considerations.³³

Robinson's personal travail of finding "the proper wife" was not wasted on him alone. Sister Rachel also voiced concern, especially toward his vagabond lifestyle. If the army could not offer him something constructive, she implored him to return home. "I am afraid you will run wild out there in that land of refugees and

wild Indians . . . [especially considering] the fact that you have but few, if any ladies among you. . . ." Rachel continued her worrisome letter by instructing Robinson that, if by remote chance he found a wife "out there," she hoped before he took that "irretrievable step," he would compare her honestly against other women he had known. She knew at least two or three women who were in "love with the fife and drum," and felt so confident in Robinson's ability to swoon them, she asked they "suspend their choice" until they had met her brother. After all, Rachel exclaimed, "you are a marrying man."³⁴

While at Fort Washita, Robinson received a welcome parcel from home that may have been one of the few material luxuries he enjoyed on the frontier. Incessantly worried about his health, the elder Johnston sent Robinson several sentimental silver heirlooms as "a small memorial of your excellent mother and myself." In addition to a tumbler marked with his initials, "J.J.," (John Johnston) he also forwarded a soup ladle, two tablespoons and one teaspoon all engraved with his wife's initials, "R.R.," (Rachel Robinson)—made from buttons and buckles worn by Robinson's grandfather and namesake, Abraham Robinson.³⁵ While it took months for the package to arrive in Robinson's care, he responded immediately, expressing hope that he would be "able to preserve them during my roving life, as a memento of home and my revered parents."³⁶

Despite Robinson's remote assignments, he developed strong opinions on contemporary issues. On subjects such as Indian removal, Texas annexation or expansionism, his personal involvement enabled an empirical perspective. On issues in which he was involved indirectly, such as slavery or general politics, Robinson felt little trepidation sharing his opinions. For example, he shared his father's empathy for Indians. He did not approve of the Indian Removal Act, one of nineteenth-century America's most draconian domestic policies, enacted by President Andrew Jackson. In late 1845, Robinson bewailed to his father that the "disturbed condition" of the Cherokees was caused entirely by the government's "lack of policy."³⁷ To his mind, the long-term effect of the 1835 New Echota Treaty "was still working evil among these unhappy people."³⁸ The bloody feud that arose between the old and new settlers (the differing factions within the Cherokee Nation) never would have existed, Robinson concluded, had it not been for General Jackson and the Schermerhorn Treaty.³⁹ Robinson's verbal lashing of Reverend John Schermerhorn's actions was a powerful indictment, especially from an officer sworn to uphold government policies.

Robinson corroborated his father's disdain for individuals appointed to monitor Indian affairs. Prior to departing for Fort Leavenworth to assume duties as regimental adjutant, Robinson voiced concern at the government's irrational appointments and its misguided policies surrounding what he termed, "the Cherokee matter."

The malcontents are mostly half breeds and white, they could easily be bought-off. The rest could then be pacified if the Govt would send a man of weight of character among them to manage their affairs for a few years. Their present agent Col. Mc[illegible] is a good man, but old and afraid to [illegible]. Their last agent Butler was a scoundrel, and the previous one, Stokes, was a [illegible] in the old ship Jersey and worn out with whiskey & gambling before Gen.

Jackson appointed him. Schermerhorn who made the Treaty of 35 was a preacher!! without getting credit for honesty! Such are the men to whom the Government has confided this most important trust.⁴⁰

Respecting his father's experience coupled with his own, Robinson questioned policies developed by individuals he considered to be nothing but political hacks.

Robinson's understanding of the "Texas matter" was not limited to annexation.⁴¹ Like many Americans of the antebellum era, "Texas" included the festering problem of slavery and its expansion, two vexing issues that Robinson grappled with for some time. While patrolling the U.S.-Texas border, Robinson endeavored to understand what ramifications a "state" of Texas would have on the Union. In early 1845, nine months before annexation, Robinson analyzed the situation for his father. Economically, he did not think the North had any cause for worry. "No patriot may feel the least apprehension on the score of its giving much preponderance to the South," Robinson wrote. "North of the 32nd parallel there is no country worth living on scarcely and owing to its climate and other influences, want of harbors, want of water & [illegible]—it will never support a dense population." As far as the population influencing the balance of power in the U.S. Congress, Robinson remained unconcerned.

The whole inhabitable portion of the country will be about 250 miles square, not by 2000 square miles, as large as the state of Missouri. About 8,000 square miles less than Virginia (which later will in consequence of the admission of Texas soon become a free state). In fact this will soon be the case in Missouri—taking Louisiana as the rate of population for Texas . . . we will never have more than 470,000 people there, the half of which would be slave, so that five or six representatives and two senators in all that is to counterbalance Nebraska and Iowa, and the influence of Missouri, Virginia, Nebraska and Kentucky, which must at some early period be swayed with the North.⁴²

If maintaining the political balance of power was not convincing, Robinson thought the Indians might reap benefits if Texas were brought into the Union. "It is better that the United States should get Texas if they can decently than to allow it to remain as it is. It is highly important for the sake of the Indians in the west that some honorable government should exist there."⁴³ The need for "an honorable government" became extremely important to Robinson after he learned how Texas officials had attacked Indian representatives while attending a treaty council.⁴⁴ Slavery, however, remained a serious problem. "The only check that can be put to the tide of slavery [expanding] south now," Robinson argued, "is to foster the colony which the English & Mexicans have commenced south of the Rio Grande. It will do more to kill slavery than any abolition movement in the north."⁴⁵

The physical remoteness of frontier posts fostered Robinson's innate curiosity for the future. The solitary hours enabled him to ruminate about what lay ahead for the wide open spaces he knew so well and to ponder the democratizing effects new technologies could have on America. In one letter to his father, Robinson even anticipated man learning to fly.

No extension of our country, if it should embrace the whole of North America, will ever make it so extended as to the time taken for communication, as were the old 13 states; for with a rail road [sic] from Washington city to Oregon and a Morse's Electrical Telegraph thereon, news could come instantly, and in five days the whole distance would be traveled; and from Quebec to the Nueces (pronounced Neway-ces), on the south west of Texas, a rail road would take a man in 3 days, or to the city of Mexico in five days, this, leaving out of count the atmospheric rail way which is destined to make man travel faster than the whirlwind.—The wonderful civilizer is to be steam!⁴⁶

Although Robinson frequently described portions of the frontier in less than glowing terms, complaining regularly about the extreme temperatures and the shallowness of the dry soil, he believed the region held great promise agriculturally if the prairie could be left unharmed and nature permitted to take its course.

It would, in course of time, place such a vast quantity of vegetable mould [sic] upon the surface as to render it impossible for soil to be burnt up, and in course of time also, forests would spring up and the Earth's surface being kept moist, would furnish greater supplies of water to the streams and render them navigable all the year, instead of being three fourths of it almost dry, and the very abundance of water would increase the quantity of rain on the country. A country of 400,000 square miles would perhaps become habitable home for man, ten times the size of Ohio, and capable of holding at least 20 millions of inhabitants.⁴⁷

For a man prescient enough to anticipate man's ability to fly, it was ironic that Robinson could not envision man irrigating the desert.

It is unknown whether Robinson intended to remain in the army; however, in July 1842, the elder Johnston made a proposal, well aware of his son's semi-disillusionment with army life. At his farm in Upper Piqua, the elder Johnston had converted an old mill into a cabin, informing Robinson that he intended to convey him the property and another 130 acres if he would pay for the cabin. "My proposal," wrote the elder Johnston, "originates altogether from a desire to provide for you as well as I can, [and] to put your mind at rest for the future."⁴⁸

Obviously excited about the proposition, Robinson responded immediately. "In reply to your kind offer of the 'log cabin' I have only to say 'yes' to all your propositions and right glad I am to say so, with many thanks for the gift."⁴⁹ Robinson doubted he could pay the balance by December, but he would make every effort. If not, he certainly could within the coming year. Thanks to his father's generosity, Robinson no longer was forced to endure the vicissitudes of army life. He had alternatives; he had a place to go. "World" events soon took precedence, causing imponderable repercussions.

Robinson's Death

In the late morning of November 25, 1846, the Army of the West, under the command of Lieutenant General Kearny, forded the Colorado River and set foot on California soil. Their six-month, 2,000-mile journey from Fort Leavenworth completed the conquest of western territories belonging to Mexico. Santa Fe had been taken in August without resistance. The challenging march along the Gila Trail had been successful despite harsh weather, low rations and rugged terrain. Many men were shoeless and the horses and mules were failing. Despite the hardship, the army continued along the southern edge of what is now the Imperial Valley, turning northward toward El Centro.⁵⁰

On November 28, the men reached Carrizo Spring and availed themselves of the mineral-rich waters. Poor foraging conditions hastened the unit's movement to the oasis of Vallecito. Despite a brief respite, the men were in pitiful condition. "Our men were inspected today," wrote Captain Johnston, adjutant to General Kearny. "Poor fellows! They are well nigh naked—some of them barefoot—a sorry looking set. A dandy would think that, in those swarthy sun-burnt faces, a lover of his country will see no signs of quailing. They will be ready for their hour when it comes."⁵¹

Robinson Johnston, desirous of viewing the Pacific Ocean since departing Fort Leavenworth in June, ascended a mountain near camp. "When about 3,000 feet above camp," Robinson wrote in his diary, "[I] found myself surrounded by peaks. I would have gone further, but was alone and exhausted; a fog overhung the west range, so that my view was cut off; else, in one direction, I think I might have seen the Pacific ocean. . . ."⁵² His quest would remain elusive.

The following morning the army departed Vallecito, marched eighteen miles along a perilous path through narrow passes to the San Felipe Valley, and camped at an abandoned Indian village.⁵³ The next day they arrived at Warner's Ranch located sixty miles from San Diego. While it lacked the luxury of the Missouri prairie, Captain Johnston wrote, the area remained "a most enchanting sight. . . ."⁵⁴ The men enjoyed their first hearty meal in days. A limited reconnaissance of the countryside coupled with Kearny's questioning of the locals, indicated that several Mexican horsemen were in close proximity.

In the late morning of December 4, the mounted forces left Warner's en-route to San Pasqual via Santa Ysabel. After a grueling, fifteen mile march in driving rain and blustering wind, the army reached an abandoned chapel once administered by Mission San Diego. While the shelter was a welcomed sight, the army learned that a party of eighty Californios were thought to be encamped at a nearby Indian village. Knowledge of the exact distance made attempting "a dash on them in a dark, stormy night . . ." too risky, Captain Johnston wrote, "So we slept till morning."⁵⁵

The next evening the entourage camped at Santa Maria. A night reconnaissance supported what they had learned earlier: a contingent of eighty Californio lancers known as *Los Galgos* (The Greyhounds) under the command of Major Andrés Pico, brother of California Governor Pío Pico, were bivouacked in the Indian village of San Pasqual, about thirty miles from San Diego. The maneuver, however, had been executed poorly. While it corroborated previous information, it also provided the Californios with proof their enemy was close at hand: the scouting party had

dropped both a dragoon jacket and a blanket stamped "U.S." Pico alerted his men, reaped for battle, and waited for the invaders to approach.⁵⁶

Since the beginning of the U. S.- Mexican War in May 1846, the arrival of American forces in California had caused dissension among the population. Based on their experience under Mexican rule, some Californios thought it best to side with the Americans. Still others detested foreign occupation, were determined to resist and, if necessary, stand and fight. By late 1846, the Californios had reoccupied Los Angeles, and their relentless harassment of military forces in San Diego and Monterey had thwarted the Americans' attempts to obtain supplies. The surprise at finding Kearny's tattered army traveling west toward San Diego imbued the Californios with grit and a determination to fight.⁵⁷

Once the night patrol returned, General Kearny decided to move immediately. The army easily could have bypassed their opponents, but having completed the longest march in U.S. Army history, the troops were eager to fight. In the pre-dawn hours of December 6, 1846, the cold, wet, ragged force of 160 men commenced the seven-mile march toward San Pasqual. As the Americans reached the crest of a hill and with a mile to go, General Kearny issued a final order. He implored the unit to do its duty. The country expected nothing less. "One point of the saber," Kearny reminded his men, "was worth any number of thrusts."⁵⁸ When the army reached the valley floor, Kearny issued the order to trot. Although three-quarters of a mile from the enemy's encampment, Captain Johnston, who had been selected to lead the mounted column's forward edge, misheard the command. In his eagerness to attack, he extended his saber, yelled "Charge!" and took off at a gallop, promptly becoming the unit's first casualty.⁵⁹

When the San Pasqual skirmish ended in the early morning of December 6, 1846, Lieutenant William H. Emory scoured the battlefield for his comrades. The first body he found was Captain Johnston's, who had sustained a bullet directly between the eyes. Lieutenant Emory ordered five soldiers to transport Johnston's body back to camp. General Kearny had wanted the bodies transferred to San Diego; however, after having strapped their remains across the mules' backs, the soldiers realized there were not enough healthy animals to transport the wounded and the dead. Therefore Kearny, himself wounded critically, decided to bury the dead in a mass grave underneath a willow tree. "With no other accompaniment," wrote Lieutenant Emory, "than the howling of the myriads of wolves attracted by the smell," the sorrowful task was carried out.

Thus were put to rest together, and forever, a band of brave and heroic men. The long march of 2,000 miles had brought out little command, both officers and men, to know each other well. Community of hardships, dangers, and privations, had produced relations of mutual regard which caused their loss to sink deeply in our memories.⁶⁰

After enduring additional hardships, not the least of which was a possible counterattack by the Californios, a relief party from San Diego comprised of one hundred sailors and eighty marines arrived in the morning of December 10; the result of a successful but perilous mission begun by Kit Carson, Lieutenant Edward F. Beale, and an Indian scout two days earlier to infiltrate enemy lines

and seek relief from Commodore Robert F. Stockton in San Diego.⁶¹ Undoubtedly grateful at seeing such a large force, Lieutenant Emory's follow-up report mentioned how the "gallant fellows busied themselves till day distributing their provisions and clothes to our naked and hungry people."⁶² As the sun rose on the morning of December 11, the Californios, cognizant their enemy had been re-supplied, scurried into the hills. The siege was over. Shortly afterward, the "most tattered and ill-fed detachment of men that ever the United States mustered under her colors," wrote Lieutenant Emory, marched westward toward San Diego. Soon the entourage approached the crest of a steep hill that commanded excellent views of the Pacific Ocean. "The sight," Emory reflected years later, produced "strange but agreeable emotions."⁶³

Thirty-eight months later, the adjutant general of the U. S. Army received an emotional plea from John Johnston, the dead officer's father. The elder Johnston had hoped the military would have honored several earlier requests to return his son's remains to Piqua, Ohio; however, they had failed to comply. "I now earnestly invoke the interposition of your Department to aid me in a duty nearer to my heart than all others," Johnston wrote.⁶⁴ Through earlier communications, Johnston learned army officers had identified his son, but if doubts remained, Johnston assured the adjutant general that he could be "easily identified from the fact that he was shot in the head. The other officers being killed by lances."⁶⁵

In April 1848, sixteen months after the battle, the bodies of Robinson and his compatriots were removed from their makeshift grave and re-interred in a field southwest of the pueblo of San Diego.⁶⁶ The War Department informed John Johnston that there should be little problem distinguishing Robinson's grave because officers had been buried separately from enlisted men. Johnston also had been informed that a special-duty officer planned to leave New York City for California in December for the express purpose of securing Robinson's remains. In all probability these remains would be shipped from Monterey or San Francisco, transported directly to New York, and forwarded to Piqua. The casualty assistance officer expected the assignment to last six months.⁶⁷



The obelisk in the foreground marks the gravesite of Captain Abraham Robinson Johnston in the Johnston Cemetery, Piqua, Ohio. Courtesy of Marla F. Fair, Interpreter, Piqua Historical Area, Piqua Ohio, an Ohio Historical Society site.

By February 1850, Johnston, disenchanted with the lack of progress over the previous two years, pleaded with the adjutant general for assistance. He summarized past events and the numerous broken promises. The most recent word he had received from the government was from late 1848, notifying him that the duty officer had died of cholera while en-route to California.⁶⁸ Nothing had transpired since. All Johnston knew was that his son remained interred in a makeshift military cemetery somewhere outside of San Diego. Obviously embarrassed by its mismanagement, the army finally returned Robinson's remains to Piqua, where he was buried in the family plot on April 15, 1852. Nevertheless, a potential mystery exists.⁶⁹ Was Robinson's body returned, or did the army make yet *another* mistake?

In late December 1852, the *San Francisco Daily Herald* reported a stove company proprietor was startled to find a male skeleton in a box purported to contain a cast iron stove. Thinking a murder had occurred, he notified the coroner; however, by the next day the "mystery" had been solved. The remains were deemed those of Abraham Robinson Johnston, the local newspaper reported, "A gallant officer killed years ago at the Battle of San Pasqual." It seemed that in 1850, Robinson's remains were forwarded to the army quartermaster in San Diego awaiting shipment to the East. A fire broke out in the storage area, forcing a hasty evacuation. In the rush to salvage as much as possible, the box that contained Robinson's remains became mixed with three boxes of stoves. Afterward, in sorting through material to be shipped east, an army clerk mistakenly sent a stove box. The other two stove boxes, as well as the one that held Robinson's remains, were sold to a San Francisco business. To conceal its ineptitude, the army may have buried Robinson in an unmarked grave at the Presidio in San Francisco. If true, no record exists that John Johnston and bereaved family members in Piqua were told differently; a cast iron stove may well lie beneath the obelisk of Captain Abraham Robinson Johnston.⁷⁰

A further twist makes Robinson's fate only more ironic. In mid-1845, Robinson wrote his father that if he remained in the army and America's expansionist impulse continued, he felt certain he would "yet see the shores of the Pacific."⁷¹ If the military had failed in its mission and buried Johnston in the Presidio to conceal the evidence, the ultimate irony is that, while Captain Johnston never saw the ocean while alive, in death he has had a commanding view of the Pacific for over 150 years.



A badly weathered inscription on Robinson's gravestone identifies him as "Captain Abraham Robinson Johnston of the First U. S. Dragoons, Son of John and Rachel Johnston." Courtesy of Marla F. Fair, Interpreter, Piqua Historical Area, Piqua, Ohio, an Ohio Historical Society site.

NOTES

I wish to dedicate the article to the memory of my parents, Amos and June Wright, who stressed the unyielding importance of studying history and to Professor Gene D. and Dottie L. Lewis who, by instruction and personal example, taught me the nuances of thorough research and concise writing.

1. Abraham Robinson Johnston (hereafter A. R. Johnston) to John Johnston, July 30, 1845, Colonel John Johnston Papers MSSqJ72RM (hereafter Johnston Papers), Letter #236, Cincinnati Historical Society Library, Cincinnati, Ohio (hereafter CHSL).
2. In 1848, the U.S. House of Representatives published the diary of Lieutenant Colonel Emory that described his experiences traveling across the plains and mountains to the Southwest and westward toward San Diego. This publication included the journal Abraham Robinson Johnston maintained beginning on June 30, 1846, when the unit left Fort Leavenworth, and ending on December 4, two days prior to the Battle of San Pasqual. Johnston's entries included detailed descriptions of terrain, vegetation, and the different Native Americans encountered en-route. Occasionally, he expounded about individual soldiers and fellow officers. He described the military aspects of the mission in clear, concise, and dutiful language. His penchant for drawing—clay pots and other utensils used by native peoples, Spanish or Indian ruins, as well as key geographical and strategic landmarks—was quite evident. Lieutenant Colonel W. H. Emory, *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance, from Fort Leavenworth, in Missouri, to San Diego, in California Including Part of the Arkansas, Del Norte and Gila Rivers* (Washington, D.C.: Thirtieth Congress—First Session, Ex. Document. No. 41, 1848). See also: Arthur Woodward, "Lances at San Pasqual," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1946). This definitive work on the battle of San Pasqual appeared in 1946, the 100th anniversary of the engagement.
3. The Johnston manuscript collection (John Johnston and Abraham Robinson Johnston) housed at the Cincinnati Historical Society Library does not contain letters that Captain Johnston may have written his father during the expedition. The last letter on file that Johnston wrote was dated June 22, 1846, after having arrived at Fort Leavenworth and just prior to departing on the expedition. "When I get out on the march with my head clearer I will write more particularly about my personal affairs." A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, June 22, 1846, Johnston Papers, Letter #240, CHSL. This is interesting because Emory's journal entry for October 13, 1846, leads one to believe that he may have written home. "We had already moved our camp across the river, to a camp with grama grass; we then stayed all day, and completed our work, wrote to friends, and closed the door to future communication with the States, as we will now pass into the Apache country, where it is probable no one will dare follow us." Emory, *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance*, 575.
4. Kenneth W. Duckett, "John Johnston," *Museum Echoes*, (Columbus, OH: Ohio Historical Society, January 1960), 3-6; John Johnston, *Recollections of Sixty Years* (Dayton, OH: John Henry Patterson, 1915), 5-9. John Johnston maintained a deep and abiding friendship with General William Henry Harrison that lasted through his brief tenure as the nation's ninth president.
5. For a short time, Robinson was tutored privately by Dr. Bishop at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. Thayer was instrumental in developing the Corps of Cadets into professionally trained officers. He made expansive changes in the curriculum, created the office of the commandant of cadets, organized cadets into tactical units and introduced new methods of instruction. One of his most enduring reforms was the introduction of the order of merit concept. His sixteen-year tenure as superintendent earned him the moniker, "Father of the Military Academy." Center of Military History, United States Army, *Army Historical Series, American Military History* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), 155-156.
6. John Johnston to A. R. Johnston, February 3, 1831, Johnston Papers, Letter #20, CHSL.
7. Ibid.
8. One of Robinson's classmates who subsequently achieved fame during the Civil War was George G. Meade, commander of Union forces at the battle of Gettysburg. Other cadets who attended during Robinson's time included Braxton Bragg, John C. Pemberton, and Joseph Hooker—all members of the class of 1837; P.G.T. Beauregard and Irvin McDowell—members of the class of 1838. *Register of the Officers and Cadets of the U.S. Military Academy, 1831*, Special Collections, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York.
9. When he repeated his freshman year (fourth class year), he ranked 32nd in a class of 65. During his sophomore year (third class year), he ranked 32nd in a class of 61. He improved his standing

during his junior year (second class year) to 23rd out of 60. His senior year (first class year), Robinson ranked 28th out of 54. Classmate George G. Meade ranked 19th. *Register of the Officers and Cadets of the U.S. Military Academy, 1832, 1833, 1834 and 1835* respectively.

10. John Johnston to A. R. Johnston, December 20, 1834, Johnston Papers, Letter #205, CHSL. Sometime in the winter of 1834-1835, Robinson fell while ice-skating on the Hudson River, severely breaking his leg. By May the bone had not healed. Medical specialists from New York City examined Robinson's leg and recommended he be transferred to the city to undergo an operation. John Johnston to A. R. Johnston, May 8, 1835, Johnston Papers, Letter #208, CHSL.

11. Response from Ms. Suzanne Christoff, United States Military Academy (USMA), Special Collections Librarian, concerning events surrounding Cadet Johnston's performance on the exam that delayed his commissioning, March 5, 2004. Diploma from the United States Military Academy, September 1, 1835, A. R. Johnston Papers, MSS 565, Item 64, CHSL.

12. Morrison, *The Best School in the World*, 11. Agitation came not only from the War Department and high-ranking military officers, but also from Indian agents, settlers, and western emigrants. The chief concern among politicians revolved around the old bugaboo, leftover from the American Revolution, of a "standing army." The idea of an "aristocratic mounted army seemed a special threat to American democratic life." Francis Paul Prucha, *The Sword of the Republic: The United States Army on the Frontier, 1783-1846* (Toronto: Macmillan Company, 1969), 240.

13. Prucha, *The Sword of the Republic*, 248.

14. Center of Military History, United States Army, *Army Historical Series, American Military History*, 162.

15. Prucha, *The Sword of the Republic*, 339-364.

16. *Ibid.*, 352-353.

17. *Ibid.*, 339-364.

18. Morrison, *The Best School in the World*, 21. When Robinson left Fort Leavenworth in January 1840, to report presumably to Fort Gibson, he described traveling south on horse in temperatures of 9 degrees below zero. Even though he had his back to the wind, "It was cold enough . . . to try every nerve in one's body." Four years later, an opportunity arose raising the possibility that Robinson would have to travel north to Fort Leavenworth in the dead of winter. And he was not looking forward to the trip: "It is far worse turning one's face to the wind." A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, August 6, 1844, Johnston Papers, Letter #233, CHSL.

19. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, July 24, 1842, Johnston Papers, Letter #225, CHSL. While on recruiting duty in Boston, Robinson availed himself of some of the "finer" aspects of his immediate surroundings. He ventured into the White Mountains of Vermont as well as staying at Mohawk, a "resort" situated along the Massachusetts coastline, "within a stone's throw of the ocean." Wrote Robinson: "The Hotel here is a great resort for Bostonians and strangers during this season. And many a wealthy nabob of the city have cottages here for their summer residences, quite a village has grown up and land is very valuable now, and once the whole promoritory [sic] I am told, was sold for a suit of clothes."

20. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, November 26, 1842, Johnston Papers, Letter #226, CHSL.

21. Rebecca Reynolds to A. R. Johnston, November 15, 1840, Johnston Papers, Letter #33, CHSL.

22. Morrison, *The Best School in the World*, 22.

23. William B. Johnston to A. R. Johnston, November 1, 1843, MSS 565, Letter #49, CHSL.

24. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, August 6, 1844, Johnston Papers, Letter #233, CHSL.

25. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, November 12, 1844, Johnston Papers, Letter #234, CHSL.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. Morrison, *The Best School in the World*, 20.

29. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, October 13, 1845, Frank Jones Collection, Letter #35, CHSL.

30. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, June 22, 1846, Johnston Papers, Letter #240, CHSL.

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31. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, May 24, 1846 and June 16, 1846, Johnston Papers, Letters #239 and #240, CHSL; Robinson was appointed regimental adjutant on June 16, 1846, and while he was promoted officially two weeks later, he did not receive his commission as captain until August 15. On August 17, the day before the Army of the West marched into Santa Fe, Kearny appointed him aide-de-camp. Ralph P. Bieber, editor, *Marching With the Army of the West, 1846-1848* (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1936), 21.
32. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, March 4, 1845, Johnston Papers, Letter #235, CHSL.
33. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, July 30, 1845, Johnston Papers, Letter #236, CHSL.
34. Rachel Reynolds to A. R. Johnston, July 6, 1845, A. R. Johnston Papers, MSS 565, Letter #56, CHSL.
35. John Johnston to A. R. Johnston, March 24, 1844, Johnston Papers, Letter #231a, CHSL.
36. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, August 6, 1844, Johnston Papers, Letter #233, CHSL. In his last letter written prior to departing on the Santa Fe-California expedition on June 22, 1846, he informed his father that he left most of his property at Fort Gibson but, "if any thing happened [to] me," what little personal property he owned would be forwarded to Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. It is not known what may have happened to the silver mementos. Robinson's estate settlement in 1849 did not list any personal possessions, only cash assets. "Capt. A.R. Johnston's estate monies rec'd and how disposed of, a return has been made to the Miami County Court," July 28, 1849, A. R. Johnston Papers, MSS 565, #63, CHSL.
37. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, November 21, 1845, Johnston Papers, Letter #237, CHSL.
38. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, January 14, 1846, Johnston Papers, Letter #238, CHSL.
39. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, January 14, 1846, Johnston Papers, Letter #238, CHSL. What Robinson referred to as the "Schermerhorn Treaty" was, in fact, the New Echota Treaty. Reverend John F. Schermerhorn, a close confidant of the president, was appointed to negotiate on behalf of the United States with the Cherokee Nation and obtain a "speedy" removal treaty. Historian Robert Remini referred to Schermerhorn as an "ambitious cleric who had been helpful in obtaining a removal treaty with the Seminoles." Robert Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833-1845* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 295-296.
40. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, May 24, 1846, Johnston Papers, Letter #239, CHSL.
41. Robinson encountered Texans occasionally: "Most of those who are very anxious for annexation are those to whom the Texas government are [sic] indebted—it is all humbug about their making an alliance with Gt. Britain." A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, August 6, 1844, Johnston Papers, Letter #233, CHSL.
42. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, March 4, 1845, Johnston Papers, Letter #235, CHSL.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.; Hurt, *The Indian Frontier*, 217-218. While Robinson's letter did not provide exact details, he may have been referring to what became known as the "Council House Fight." In January 1840, a group of Comanches arrived in San Antonio to negotiate terms for peace and to hand over their white prisoners. When the "meeting" was over, thirty-five Comanches including chiefs, women and children had been killed and another twenty-seven, consisting of women and children, were held captive.
45. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, July 30, 1845, Johnston Papers, Letter #236, CHSL.
46. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, March 4, 1845, Johnston Papers, Letter #235, CHSL. Robinson's "atmospheric rail way" must certainly be the airplane.
47. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, July 30, 1845, Johnston Papers, Letter #236, CHSL.
48. John Johnston to A. R. Johnston, July 11, 1842, Johnston Papers, Letter #224, CHSL. He even recommended that if Robinson were granted leave later in the year, perhaps he could come by and "designate a plan for an orchard and other improvements to be made hereafter."
49. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, July 24, 1842, Johnston Papers, Letter #225, CHSL.
50. Woodward, "Lances at San Pasqual, Part II" *California Historical Society Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1946), 297.
51. Emory, *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance*, 612.

52. *Ibid.*, 612-613.
53. Woodward, "Lances at San Pasqual, Part II," 302.
54. Emory, *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance*, 613.
55. *Ibid.*, 614.
56. Earlier in the march, the Army of the West pressed into service the talents of master scout Kit Carson who was traveling east to Washington, D.C. with important messages from John C. Fremont. Apparently Kearny lacked confidence in Carson's loyalty, and instead of sending him to reconnoiter the enemy's position, he sent, as Ralph Moody wrote, "the bungling [Lieutenant] Hammond, who knew nothing of the country, the people or the language. If Carson had been sent he would have doubtlessly brought back an accurate report that it was composed of Californios lancers, not Mexican cavalymen." Ralph Moody, *The Old Trails West: The Stories of the Trails that Made a Nation* (New York: Promontory Press, 1963), 55-56; Sally Cavell Johns, "Viva Los Californios! The Battle of San Pasqual," *The Journal of San Diego History (JSDH)* 19, no. 4 (1973): 1-13; Woodward, "Lances at San Pasqual, Part II"; Richard Griswold del Castillo, "The U.S.-Mexican War in San Diego, 1846-1847: Loyalty and Resistance," *JSDH* 49, no. 1 (2003): 21-41.
57. Griswold del Castillo, "The U.S.-Mexican War in San Diego," 21-41 *passim*.
58. Woodward, "Lances at San Pasqual, Part II," 35.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Emory, *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance*, 109.
61. *Ibid.*, 111-112.
62. *Ibid.*, 112.
63. *Ibid.*, 109, 112.
64. John Johnston to General R. Jones, February 4, 1850, Johnston Papers, Letter #248, CHSL.
65. *Ibid.*
66. George Hruby, San Pasqual Battlefield Site Location Project—Is An American Cavalryman Still Buried on Mule Hill? <http://www.sanpasqual.org/cox199801.html> (accessed May 17, 2006).
67. Major Swords to John Johnston, October 20, 1848, Johnston Papers, Letter #248, CHSL.
68. John Johnston to General R. Jones, February 4, 1850, Johnston Papers, Letter #248, CHSL.
69. Bieber, ed., *Marching With the Army of the West*, 28.
70. Herbert Lockwood, *Fallout From the Skeleton's Closet* (San Diego: The San Diego Independent, 1967), p. 29.
71. A. R. Johnston to John Johnston, July 30, 1845, Johnston Papers, Letter #236, CHSL.