

---

## Outside the Sandbox: Camels in Antebellum America

---

Ryan Lancaster

---

There was a time during the antebellum period in America when the United States military thought to use unconventional means to explore the deserts of the Southwest. One of the methods chosen was to use camels—not only as a vehicle of conveyance but also for hauling supplies and potentially for use in combat. However, it was to be short lived, as the United States Camel Corps was only in service for a few years. The loss of crucial leaders, the oncoming Civil War, and the advent of new transportation technology combined to end the Camel Corps experiment in the United States.

The Camel Corps had a small, yet crucial collection of advocates who helped advance the project. Influential men, like Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, virtually formed a cabal that surrounded the program. At the advent of the Civil War, Davis departed for the Confederacy. With his departure, the Camel Corps lost the clout in Washington DC that it needed to survive. In addition, the war itself brought in a new directive for the Union. Experimentation was no longer a luxury or ready commodity, so using camels for warfare was not a chance worth taking. Most importantly, the advent of new technologies like the steam engine pacified the West and provided an easier mode of transportation compared to the camel or the horse. In essence, the Camel Corps was not a victim of its own hubris, but rather a victim of timing. Had the Army used these animals even a few years prior to these events, perhaps the Camel Corps would have established itself as an integral part of the military.

The people of America did not know much about camels. The success of the experiment would have been of the utmost advantage to the Southwest, for it would have secured the West until the railroads were finished. The supporters who pushed for this program, though often partisan in the beginning, were pleased in the end with the outcomes. They postulated that the animal was superior to the mule in speediness, load carrying, and durability. They also argued that the camels' upkeep was more affordable. People who witnessed the camel being field-tested could attest to the animal's flexibility.<sup>1</sup>

Discrepancies exist in the historiography of the subject regarding the origins of this endeavor. In 1836, Captain George H. Crosman lobbied the United States Department of War to use camels as a means of conveyance. His report was

unheeded. However, in 1847 his urgings, amplified by those of Major Henry C. Wayne, won the consideration of Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi.<sup>2</sup> The son of frontiersman and camel rider Edward F. Beale specified an alternative version to this origin story in a newspaper article:

The idea came to General Beale when he was exploring Death Valley with Kit Carson. He had carried with him a book of travels in China and Tartary, and it occurred to him that with the camel the Arizona desert would become less terrible. Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War, sympathized with (General) Beale, and a supply ship sailed, under command of David Dixon Porter, Beale's kinsman, for Tunis, where a herd of camels was purchased.<sup>3</sup>

Money and support were crucial if this project was going to gain traction. In the last days of the 1851 session of Congress, when the army appropriation bill was under deliberation, Davis presented an amendment providing for the acquisition of thirty camels and twenty dromedaries, with ten Arab drivers and the essential equipment.<sup>4</sup> During this time, miners were extracting gold in California, thousands of people were exploring the western plains, and a transcontinental railway was only at best a vague vision. Posted at Fort Yuma, between California and Arizona on the Colorado Desert was Edward F. Beale, then a lieutenant. A torrent of westward migration and goods passed that way every week. The sickness, misery, and heavy death rate amongst horses and mules in the arid, solar warmth persuaded Beale that the camels of the Sahara and Arabia could be beneficial to the Army in that region. He wrote extensively on the topic to Davis. He arranged images displaying numerous potential uses for the "ship of the desert," including transporting field cannons across their backbones and moving sharpshooters to the front.<sup>5</sup>

Davis could not launch and sustain this project alone. In fact, this proved to be one of the eventual pitfalls of the experiment. However, when U.S. forces were required to function in dry desert areas, the President and Congress began to take the idea seriously. Freshly appointed as Secretary of War by President Franklin Pierce in 1853, Davis established an army goal of developing transportation into the southwestern United States, which he and most onlookers believed to be an enormous desert. In his annual report for 1854, Davis penned, "I again invite attention to the advantages to be anticipated from the use of camels and dromedaries for military and other purposes."<sup>6</sup>

Other nations' history of success using the camel, not just in transportation but also in actual combat, would be the greatest selling point of the Camel Corps. In promoting his amendment, Davis alluded to the degree to which several countries in Asia and Africa used camels as beasts of burden. He specified that the English used camels in the East Indies to move army provisions and to carry light artillery. In addition, French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte used camels in his Egyptian operations in dealing with a culture that the French considered "wild"—much like the America power structure considered the Comanche and Apache of the American Southwest. Davis supposed that the army could effectively use camels against the Native Americans on the Western frontier. "Consuming enough water before they start to last for one hundred miles; traveling continually without rest at a rate of ten or fifteen miles an hour, they would overtake these bands of Indians, which our cavalry cannot do," claimed author J.M. Guinn.<sup>7</sup>

Congress warmed to the idea. On 3 March 1855, the U.S. Congress appropriated \$30,000 for the project.<sup>8</sup> Secretary Davis appointed Major Wayne to obtain the camels. On 4 June 1855, Wayne departed New York City on board the *USS Supply*, under the command of Lieutenant David Dixon Porter. After arriving in the Mediterranean Sea, Wayne and Porter began the process of acquiring camels. Stops included Malta, Greece, Turkey, and Egypt. They took possession of thirty-three animals: two Bactrian two-humped camels, twenty-nine one-humped dromedaries, one dromedary calf, and one booghdee (a cross between a male Bactrian and a female dromedary). They also employed five camel drivers. On 15 February 1856, *USS Supply* put out to sea for Texas.<sup>9</sup> They arrived at Indianola and unloaded the camels on 14 May 1856.<sup>10</sup> During the journey across the Atlantic, one male camel perished, but two calves were born. The excursion consequently landed with a net gain of one camel.<sup>11</sup>

Naturally, their arrival was a spectacle. When the camels sauntered into Houston, they generated quite an impression. People observed, engrossed, as the obedient animals knelt and rose on command. Miss Mary A. Shirkey of Victoria, Texas, crocheted a somewhat malodorous pair of socks for President Franklin Pierce from the coat of a government camel. For this civility, she received suitable thanks—Pierce sent her a silver goblet in return.<sup>12</sup> Major Wayne believed that perchance camel hair would prove to have monetary worth.<sup>13</sup> Immediately the Army put the camels to work. Throughout the initial days of summer in 1856, soldiers loaded them up and drove them to Camp Verde via Victoria and San Antonio.<sup>14</sup> News from early tests was optimistic. The camels demonstrated that they were exceptionally resilient, and were able to move speedily across the desert

topography, which horses found challenging. Camels demonstrated their renowned aptitude to go without water on an 1857 survey mission led by Beale. He rode a camel from Fort Defiance, Arizona, to the Colorado River, and his team used twenty-five camels on the expedition. The survey team cantered the camels into California, to their base at the Benicia Arsenal.

As an unexpected side effect, Middle Eastern culture began to creep into the American West, albeit in a small dose. The Army employed Hadji Ali and an additional immigrant to demonstrate to the soldiers how to pack the beasts. The Americans had a hard time pronouncing Ali's name so they dubbed him "Hi Jolly." Beale left on a Western excursion in June 1857, with "Hi Jolly" alongside as chief camel driver. Camels laden with six hundred to eight hundred pounds each journeyed twenty five to thirty miles per day. If the creatures performed well, a series of Army outposts could later be set up along the route to dispatch correspondence and provisions across the Southwest.<sup>15</sup>

The project achieved success. After reaching California, the voyage returned to Texas—certainly a significant achievement for Beale. He remarked:

The harder the test they (the camels) are put to, the more fully they seem to justify all that can be said of them. . . . They pack water for days under a hot sun and never get a drop; they pack heavy burdens of corn and oats for months and never get a grain; and on the bitter greasewood and other worthless shrubs, not only subsist, but keep fat. . . . I look forward to the day when every mail route across the continent will be conducted and worked altogether with this economical and noble brute.<sup>16</sup>

However, he may have been too optimistic. What he did not mention was that the camels did not take to the West's rock-strewn topsoil. The mules used by prospectors and the Army were frightened by the strange-looking animals and would occasionally panic at their mere appearance. His annual report continued with praise for the camel. The beast, to his mind, had already shown its "great usefulness and superiority over the horse for all movements upon the plains or deserts." It would be of great value against the prowling Indians, and it would substantially decrease the expenditures of the quartermaster's responsibility in supplying transport.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, these camels would eventually meet their fate at the end of a Native American tomahawk. "Instead of the camel hunting the Indian, the Indian hunted the camel . . . whenever an opportunity offered, the Apaches killed the camels; but the camel soon learned to hate and avoid the Indian, as all



Figure 1. *Horses Quenching Their Thirst, Camels Disdaining*, by Ernest Etienne de Franchville Narjot, c. 1856. The Stephen Decatur House Museum, Department of the Navy, Naval Historical Center.

living things learn to do,” historian Guinn wrote.<sup>18</sup> Regardless, Beale advised Congress to sanction the acquisition of one thousand more camels.<sup>19</sup>

The program grew. On Davis’s instructions, Porter sailed again for Egypt to obtain more camels. In late January 1859, *USS Supply* returned with a herd of forty-one animals.<sup>20</sup> While Porter was on his second undertaking, five camels from the first herd perished, leaving the Army with seventy.<sup>21</sup> These animals were going to see much of the American landscape. Through an 1859 survey of the Trans-Pecos area to find a speedier path to Fort Davis, the Army used the camels yet again. Under the expertise of Lieutenant Edward Hartz and Lieutenant William Echols, the team plotted much of the Big Bend expanse. In 1860, Echols led an additional survey squad through the Trans-Pecos utilizing the Camel Corps.<sup>22</sup>

It was about this time that interest in using the camel program began to wane. There were numerous explanations for the eventual failure of the test, which was so effective in its actions. There was a loss of interest in the venture when

Davis left the office of Secretary of War prematurely in 1858. He was its primary organizer, having worked on it as a senator and then as Secretary of War. His replacement, John B. Floyd, gave the research some backing, but never with the eagerness that Davis displayed. The Army ordered the second most respected enthusiast, Major Wayne, to other obligations a few months after the experiment got under way, and there was never afterwards a passionate field director watching over the animals at Camp Verde.<sup>23</sup>

Besides the lack of support from Washington, there was a breakdown in the care of the animals. Almost from the start, there was trouble in training and nourishing the creatures. In a span of a few weeks, several died of mysterious illnesses, and others suffered and became unfit for labor. The military officers found it difficult to get any hostler to attend to the camels, to which most of the cavalrymen took a vehement abhorrence. Horses became fidgety and unruly when stabled or rounded up with the outlandish animals. There were frequent rumors that when a camel or two had broken away during the night and wandered off, soldiers did not always put forth eagerness to find the creatures and bring them back.<sup>24</sup>

A shift in power undermined the project; however, the outbreak of the Civil War delivered the deathblow to the Camel Corps. After the spring of 1861, the camels were in the control of Confederate soldiers, horse and mule men from the South, who did not appreciate camels and did not suitably care for them. The soldiers left the camels to fend for themselves and permitted them to run wild. After the war broke out, the North shunned everything that Jefferson Davis had once supported.<sup>25</sup> On 9 September 1863, the last of the herd in California, thirty-five in number, were ordered to be sold at public auction, and were procured by Samuel McLaughlin, in whose care they had been for some time. It is likely that most of the animals found their way into farm parks and game reserves. In March 1866, following the close of the Civil War, the Army Quartermaster-General ordered that the camels remaining at Camp Verde, Texas be sold at auction.<sup>26</sup>

The Confederacy wanted little to do with the camels. In the upheaval of the Civil War, every fort in the South fell into neglect and the animals meandered away at will. They journeyed in twosomes, and occasionally in clusters of four and six across the deserts and into the mountains.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the horse and mule-dominated army did not favor the camel. The old stalwart army mule had ample friends but the camel had few. A mule would react to a lot of profanity, which did not work as well with a camel. They seemed never to give into any blasphemy in the company of a cussing driver.<sup>28</sup>

The animals were finding themselves out of a government job and needed

to look towards the private sector for gainful employment. The Portland, Oregon *Oregonian* of 20 November 1865, noted:

A correspondent asked the other day, what had become of the camels the U. S. had in Texas before the war. We have come upon traces of one of these animals which seem to have joined the rebels. . . . The first effort to introduce the camel into this country was in process of successful experiment when the war came and put a stop to it. One of the camels originally imported for the purpose fell into the hands of one of Sterling Price's Captains of infantry, commanding a company from Noxubee County, (Mississippi), who used it all through the war to carry his own and the whole company's baggage. Many a time on the march he might have been seen swinging easily along under a little mountain of carpet sacks, cooking utensils, blankets etc., amounting in all to at least 1200 lbs.<sup>29</sup>

The upkeep of these animals was a heavy price to bear. The animals required cleanliness, which meant that their keepers must scour their stalls every day, and often whitewash them. Their daily allowance of food involved a gallon of oats, ten pounds of hay, and a gallon of water to each camel, this spread by periodic servings of crushed peas or barley. The animals got along very well on this routine, even though their usual diet entailed the leaves and tender branches of all types of bushes and shrubs.<sup>30</sup>

William Brewer wrote about the ease of finding accessible food for the camels, rendering the cost of feeding them negligible: "The creosote bush grows in the more southern deserts, vile-smelling, with sticky, stinking leaves, so repulsive that it is said even the camels will not touch it. In justice to the camel, I should say that this fact has been denied. One of the men who had charge of the camels introduced by Jefferson Davis, and tested on these deserts, told me that the camels did eat sparingly of even the creosote brush."<sup>31</sup>

Locals did not like the camels. Free now to go where they pleased, rather than drifting away and isolating themselves from humankind, the camels seemed determined to loiter near the hangouts of men and to make trouble. Locals shot the camels every time they could get in range of them. In 1882, numerous wild camels were caught in Arizona and sold to a zoo, but a few survived all adversities and roved at large in the desert areas of southern Arizona and Mexico. Occasionally the soldiers in the garrisons of New Mexico and Arizona caught sight of a few



wild camels on the alkali plains. Guinn wrote on the matter,

All reports agree that the animals have grown white with age. Their hides have assumed a hard leathery appearance and they are reported to have hard prong hoofs, unlike the cushioned feet of the well-kept camel. Whether these are some of the survivors of the original importation brought into the country nearly fifty years ago, or whether their descendants are gradually being evolved to meet the conditions with which they are surrounded, I do not know.<sup>32</sup>

The camel never replaced the horse or mule in the West. However, technology eventually supplanted the camel movement. The steam engine ultimately overtook all other forms of transportation. The camel had its fair chance as a beast of burden. It flourished in every trial, but in the end was unsuccessful in swaying the people of the West. As historian Frank B. Lammons put it, "He passed on, and his bones bleached on the desert wastes of Arizona and in the Bandera Hills. 'Operation camel' passed into history because the camel was a foreigner."<sup>33</sup>

The loss of vital advocates, the outbreak of the Civil War, and the arrival of new technology ended the Camel Corps test in the United States. In this case, most American history books completely overlook a successful program because it never left any permanent effect on the culture. One could speculate about what could have been as opposed to what actually did transpire. Perhaps if the Army had brought camels to the United States a decade earlier, they might have caught on as a popular means of conveyance. However, the camel slumped into the sandstorm of historical accounts. Much like Percy Shelley's *Ozymandias*, all that remains of the American camel in the desert of American history is sand stretching for miles on end.

## Notes

1. Frank B. Lammons, "Operation Camel," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (June 1957): 50.

2. Vince Hawkins, "The U.S. Army's 'Camel Corps' Experiment," *On Point* 13, no. 1 (2007): 8-16.

3. "American Camel Corps: They Proved Efficient in Arizona Desert but Suffered from Prejudice," *The Washington Post*, June 16, 1912, p. MS2.



4. J.M. Guinn, "Camel Caravans of the American Desert," *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California and Pioneer Register*, Los Angeles 5, no. 2 (1901): 146.
5. Henry O. Tinsley, "Camels In The Colorado Desert," *The Land of Sunshine* 6, no. 4 (March 1896): 148.
6. Hawkins.
7. Guinn, 146.
8. The Library of Congress, "A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 – 1875," accessed December 2, 2013, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=010/llsl010.db&recNum=660>.
9. Hawkins.
10. Linda Wolff, *Indianola and Matagorda Island, 1837-1887: A Local History and Visitor's Guide for a Lost Seaport and a Barrier Island on the Texas Gulf Coast* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1999).
11. Hawkins.
12. Clay Thompson, "Civil War spelled end of Wild Camels in Arizona," *USA Today*, February 15, 2011.
13. Joe Zentner, "Camels in America's Southwest: The Desert Camel Experiment," *DesertUSA*, accessed December 5, 2013, <http://www.desertusa.com/animals/desert-camel-experiment.html>.
14. Hawkins.
15. Chuck Woodbury, "U.S. Camel Corps Remembered in Quartzsite, Arizona," *Out West* 1, no. 18 (2003).
16. Gary P. Nabhan, *Arab/American: Landscape, Culture, and Cuisine in Two Great Deserts* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2008).
17. Charles C. Carroll, "The Government's Importation of Camels: A Historical Sketch," 20th Annual Report, Bureau of Animal Industry (1904): 405.
18. *Ibid.*, 150.
19. Woodbury.
20. Lawrence J. Francell, *Fort Lancaster: Texas Frontier Sentinel* (College Station: Texas State Historical Association, 1999).
21. Hawkins.
22. Francell.
23. Lammons, 50.
24. Tinsley, 149.
25. Lammons, 50.
26. Fred S. Perrine, "Uncle Sam's Camel Corps," *The New Mexico Historical Review* 1, no. 4 (October 1926): 443-444; Hawkins.

27. Tinsley, 149-150.
28. Lammons, 50.
29. Perrine, 442-443.
30. Walter L. Flemming, "Jefferson Davis's Camel Experiment," *Popular Science Monthly* 174 (1909): 141-52, 399.
31. William H. Brewer, "The Great Basin," *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York* (1889): 197-227, 214.
32. Guinn, 150-151.
33. Lammons, 50.

## Bibliography

- “American Camel Corps: They Proved Efficient in Arizona Desert but Suffered from Prejudice.” *The Washington Post*. June 16, 1912. p. MS2.
- Brewer, William H. “The Great Basin.” *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York* (1889): 197-227.
- Carroll, Charles C. “The Government's Importation of Camels: A Historical Sketch.” *20th Annual Report, Bureau of Animal Industry* (1904): 391-409.
- Flemming, Walter L. “Jefferson Davis's Camel Experiment.” *Popular Science Monthly* 174 (1909): 141-52.
- Francell, Lawrence J. *Fort Lancaster: Texas Frontier Sentinel*. College Station, TX: Texas State Historical Association, 1999.
- Guinn, J.M. “Camel Caravans of the American Desert.” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California and Pioneer Register*, Los Angeles 5, no. 2 (1901): 146-51.
- Hawkins, Vince. “The U.S. Army’s ‘Camel Corps’ Experiment.” *On Point* 13, no. 1 (2007): 8-16.
- Lammons, Frank B. “Operation Camel.” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (June 1957): 20-50.
- The Library of Congress. “A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875.” Accessed December 2, 2013. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=010/llsl010.db&recNum=660>.
- Nabhan, Gary P. *Arab/American: Landscape, Culture, and Cuisine in Two Great Deserts*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2008.
- Perrine, Fred S. “Uncle Sam's Camel Corps.” *The New Mexico Historical Review* 1, no. 4 (October 1926): 434-44.
- Tinsley, Henry O. “Camels in the Colorado Desert.” *The Land of Sunshine* 6, no. 4 (March 1896): 148-444.
- Thompson, Clay. “Civil War spelled end of wild camels in Arizona.” *USA Today*, February 15, 2011.

Wolff, Linda. *Indianola and Matagorda Island, 1837-1887: A Local History and Visitor's Guide for a Lost Seaport and a Barrier Island on the Texas Gulf Coast*. Austin: Eakin Press, 1999.

Woodbury, Chuck. "U.S. Camel Corps Remembered in Quartzsite, Arizona." *Out West* 1, no. 18 (2003).

Zentner, Joe. "Camels in America's Southwest: The Desert Camel Experiment." DesertUSA. Accessed December 5, 2013. <http://www.desertusa.com/animals/desert-camel-experiment.html>.