Stephen Watts Kearny Biography

Stephen Watts Kearny

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Biography

Stephen Watts Kearny (1794-1848), American soldier, played an important role in the conquest of New Mexico and California during the Mexican War.

Stephen W. Kearny was born on Aug. 30, 1794, in Newark, N.J. After attending common school in Newark and Columbia College, he joined the Army as a first lieutenant in 1812. During the War of 1812 he fought in Canada. He was promoted to captain in 1813 and remained in the Army after the war, serving mostly in the West.

In 1819 Kearny went to Camp Missouri (later Ft. Atkinson) near Omaha. In 1820 he journeyed through unknown land to Camp Cold Water (later Ft. Snelling) near St. Paul, Minn., and in 1825 he took part in an expedition to the mouth of the Yellowstone River. During the next 20 years he had a number of commands and supervised construction of several forts, including the famous fort on the Oregon Trail later named for him.

Shortly after the outbreak of war with Mexico in 1846, Kearny was named brigadier general and placed in command of the Army of the West. With almost 1,700 men he marched to Santa Fe and captured the city without opposition on August 18. After organizing a civil government in New Mexico, he left for California with a small force. En route to San Diego he repulsed a Mexican force at San Pasqual on December 6, suffering heavy casualties. Joining Commodore Robert F. Stockton at San Diego, Kearny led his depleted army to Los Angeles, captured the town in January 1847, and established an uneasy peace. Trouble developed between the American commanders after Lt. Col. John C. Frémont, whom Stockton had appointed civil governor, refused to recognize Kearny's authority to organize a new territorial government. Stockton left for Mexico; new orders from Washington confirmed Kearny's authority; and Frémont was sent back to Washington, where he was court-martialed and found guilty of mutiny, disobedience, and improper conduct.

After the trial Kearny went to Mexico and served for brief periods as civil governor of Veracruz and, later, of Mexico City. With his health weakened by yellow fever he had contracted in Veracruz, he went to St. Louis, Mo. He died there on October 13, 1848.