

CHAPTER 1

A Controversial General



“He was a brave and efficient man and officer, whom Kansas should be proud to honor.”—William G. Cutler, in his 1883 book, *A History of the State of Kansas*.

“[He was] unfit in any respect for the command of a division of troops against a disciplined enemy.”—John Schofield, in his 1897 autobiography.

Both quotes are about the same person, Maj. Gen. James G. Blunt. General Blunt was a controversial figure in his time and has continued to be one long after his death. There’s little debate about the deeds that marked Blunt’s career as an abolitionist, a general, and a veteran. The debate arises when historians and authors have to explain his actions.

The active and controversial parts of Blunt’s life span less than a decade. According to his daughter, Blunt moved to Kansas in the fall of 1856, but he may not have arrived until the spring of 1857. Blunt moved to Kansas to take part in the struggle over whether Kansas Territory would become a free state or a slave state. When the Civil War broke out, Blunt became an officer, first a lieutenant colonel, then a brigadier general, and finally Kansas’s only major general. He served through the end of the war in 1865. But except for a few minor events in the late 1860s and a scandal in the early 1870s, Blunt disappeared from the main stage and fell into obscurity.

The decline is remarkable, considering how important Blunt was to the Union war effort in the trans-Mississippi west. The expedition he sent into the Indian Territory in the summer of 1862, although it eventually came to grief, liberated much of the Cherokee Nation and recovered Fort Gibson. His fall 1862 campaign put an end to organized Confederate resistance in northwestern Arkansas. He cleared much of the rest of the Indian

Territory of rebel forces in a series of battles in the summer of 1863. He played a key role as division commander in crushing the Price campaign in the fall of 1864. When the war ended he was preparing for one final march, a push south into Texas to end the rebellion.

As impressive as these achievements are, they can be overshadowed by Blunt's spectacular failures as a military administrator. He carried on a yearlong feud with one of his superiors. His relations with the first two governors of Kansas were notoriously poor. He did nothing to stem the rampant corruption in the military supply system. Indeed, Blunt took part in some of that corruption. And in the one incident when he was in actual danger of being killed by Confederate guerrillas at Baxter Springs, he bears some of the blame for allowing the massacre to occur.

Considering both the controversial aspects of Blunt's career as well as his importance to the region, why did he fall into obscurity after the war?

To that question I believe there are several good answers. Frankly the trans-Mississippi theater was not terribly important to the outcome of the Civil War. The western campaigns of Grant and Sherman all but determined which side would win. The eastern theater, while not quite as important, was still more important than the far west. And that theater was much closer to America's largest cities, guaranteeing that it would get the lion's share of attention then and for years afterward.

Little has been written in the intervening decades about this theater of the Civil War. Not that there aren't interesting stories and compelling people to write about. But because of the theater's relative lack of importance and profile, it's had a low priority among historians. This low profile in turn has thrown many of the region's key players into an abyss, including General Blunt.

Another reason for Blunt's "disappearance" is that he did little or nothing of importance in Kansas once the war was over. Several of the men who served under him were able to rise to prominence. Samuel Crawford became the state's first two-term governor. Preston Plumb served as an influential U.S. senator. Others were elected or appointed to high offices in the state and federal governments. A lowly sergeant, Wiley Britton, became perhaps the first author to write histories of the Civil War in the far west. In

contrast, Blunt moved to Washington, D.C., four years after the war ended, where he eventually died.

Blunt himself did nothing after the war to ensure that he would be remembered. He wrote only one narrative of his experiences, an official report that was lost for almost three decades. He wrote no memoir and had no articles printed in state or national publications. Many of his official letters survived but, except for two or three letters, his personal correspondence seems to have been destroyed.

All these reasons have led to a great deal of confusion about Blunt's actions and character. There is no greater example of this than his supposed nickname during the war: "Fat Boy." The moniker has persisted in connection with Blunt despite there being only one printed instance of it being used. Blunt used it once, in a letter published in *The Rebellion Record*, a multi-volume collection of Civil War material. The words never appear again in connection with Blunt. There seems no way to know who first gave him the nickname, whether it was used in good humor or ill, or if Blunt liked it or hated it.

Reconstructing the deeds and personality of James G. Blunt isn't easy. But such reconstruction must be done to explain how a Maine boy became a significant general during the Civil War on the far frontier.