

Boston to Camp Warner the Hard Way: A Fort Too Far

Why, after completion of the transcontinental railway, did a letter from Boston to Oregon take 36 days to reach its destination? Figure 1 shows the railway with its eastern link from Chicago to New York City and on to Boston superimposed in red on the 1870 census map. From Reno, a blue line stretches up a military road to Camp Bidwell, then Camp Warner, and finally Camp Harney. These Camps, all later renamed as Forts, were built to subdue the Paiute, Bannock, and Shoshone bands who lived along the Snake river, the “Snake War” which ended in a treaty in 1869 formalizing White takeover.



Figure 1: U.S. 1870 census population density map with rail (red) and military road (blue) from Boston to Camp Warner, Oregon

The letter shown in Figure 2 was mailed from Boston on Feb. 8, 1870 to an officer of the 23d U.S. Infantry at Camp Warner, “*via Reno Station & Camp Bidwell Cal.*” It would have arrived in Reno around Feb. 16, but did not reach Camp Warner until March 12: twenty-four additional days to travel approximately 280 miles.¹



Figure 2: Boston to Camp Warner, Oregon

Camp Warner, Oregon, shown in Figure 3, held about 300 infantry, mounted troops and officers, and was located fifty miles north of Camp Bidwell (by then Fort Bidwell) in California.



Figure 3: Camp Warner, Oregon

The answer may lie at Fort Bidwell, important enough as a military mail hub to have its own double-ring postmark by February, 1870, as shown in Figure 4 (this appears to be the earliest known use of this postmark.)²



Figure 4: Fort Bidwell, California Feb.26, 1870 postmark

Someone at Fort Bidwell put the letter for Lieutenant Manning in the wrong bag, and it went straight up into Oregon's high desert country to Camp Harney, shown in Figure 5, where it was later sent back down to Camp Warner, as we can see from the docketing on Figure 2. Twenty-four days to go 440 miles instead of 280, including the Camp Harney detour.

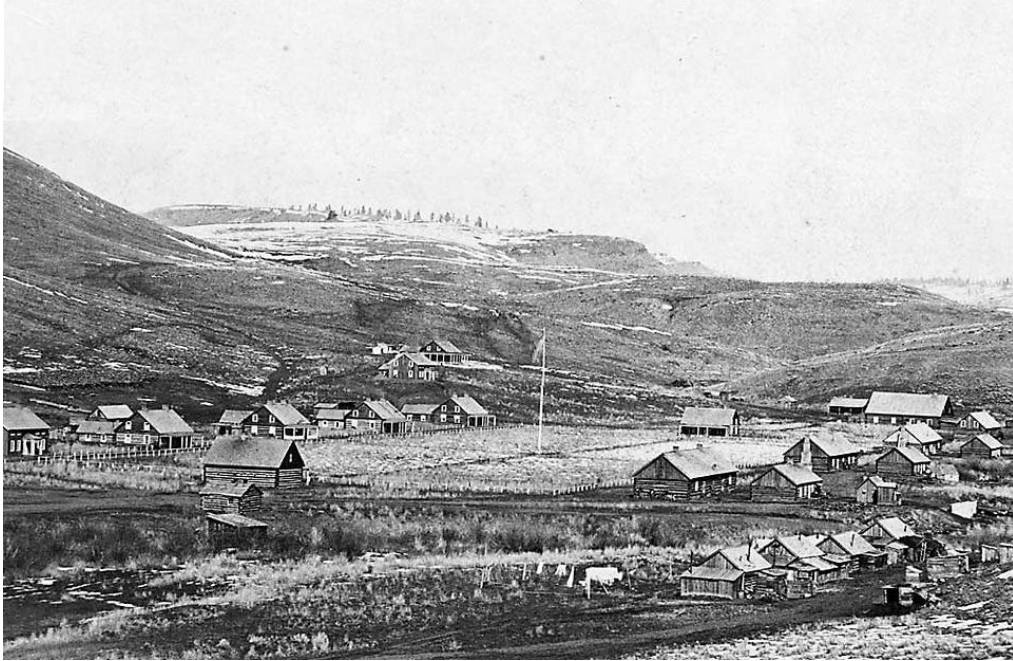


Figure 5: Camp Harney, Oregon in 1872.



Figure 6: Pikesville, Maryland, Feb.7, 1870 to Camp "Hearney" Oregon "via Canyon City."

The letter to Camp Harney shown in Figure 6 is from the addressee's father, asking for a \$150 loan while he tries to refinance a farm mortgage (the best terms he's been offered are 2½ points and 10% interest.) Canyon City is sixty miles north of Camp Harney on the Dalles

Military Road, and an odd way to approach the camp from Boise, from which the Central Oregon Military Road ran directly to Camp Harney.³

¹ Unfortunately, the letter is not enclosed, and we don't know if the docketing is by Lieutenant Manning. It is possible that Manning was on patrol when the letter arrived and the docketing reflects his personal receipt rather than the date of the letter's arrival.

² Lot 364 of Schuyler Rumsey's sale 41 (2011) is a manuscript postmark from Fort Bidwell of Dec. 31, 1870. Lot 365 bears the Fort's double circle postmark, dated Dec. 31, 1870, and Rumsey describes the mark as "known used between November 1870 and February 1871." This use is nine months earlier.

³ See "*Oregon Military History, Forts-Camps-Roads, 1805-1976*," a large-scale map produced by the Oregon Military Department in 1976, and "Oregon Central Military Road Map" at scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/findingaids/index.