

3-22-1892

Military Post Near Helena, Montana

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Recommended Citation

S. Rep. No. 421, 52nd Cong., 1st Sess. (1892)

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IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES.

MARCH 22, 1892.—Ordered to be printed.

Mr. HAWLEY, from the Committee on Military Affairs, submitted the following

REPORT:

[To accompany S. 1881.]

The Committee on Military Affairs, to whom was referred the bill (S. 1881) to establish a military post near the city of Helena, in Lewis and Clarke County, State of Montana, have had the same under consideration, and submit the following report:

The establishment of a post at Helena is a subject which has received the thoughtful and earnest consideration of the Secretary of War, the general commanding the Army, the general commanding the Department of the Missouri, and the general commanding the Department of Dakota. The abolishment of small posts and the concentration of troops at points strategically strong and conveniently situated for quick distribution in case of necessity is a policy which is being carried out by the War Department. Pursuant to this policy, Fort Shaw, Fort Logan, Fort Ellis, and Fort Maginnis, situated in Montana east of the Rocky Mountains, have all been discontinued, while other smaller posts and camps where military forces have been stationed in former times have disappeared. The so-called frontier, under the progress of settlement, no longer exists, and the rearrangement of the military posts on a permanent plan has become a duty. It has had the approval of successive Secretaries of War.

The opportunity on the part of the Government to acquire 1,000 acres of land free from cost for the purpose of this act is one of the least benefits which will eventually be derived from the location of the post at this particular point.

The committee recommend that the bill pass.

The considerations favoring the measure are fully set forth in the reports and letters of the Secretary of War, the general commanding the Army, Gen. Nelson A. Miles, commanding the Department of the Missouri, and Gen. W. Merritt, commanding the Department of Dakota, which are appended and made part of this report.

WAR DEPARTMENT,
Washington, March 1, 1892.

SIR: In returning herewith Senate bill 1881, Fifty-second Congress, first session, "A bill to establish a military post near the city of Helena, in Lewis and Clarke County, in the State of Montana," which was referred to this Department by your committee on the 1st ultimo for information and remark, I beg to state that the importance of establishing a military post at Helena, Mont., had been considered by the military authorities, and presented by them to the Department prior to the conven-

ing of the present Congress. The major-general commanding the Army, in an indorsement of November 12, 1891, upon the subject, remarked as follows:

"It would undoubtedly be advantageous to the military service to establish a permanent post at Helena, Mont., * * * and I recommend that this measure be adopted whenever Congress may be pleased to make the necessary special appropriation for the construction of barracks and quarters at that point, provided the necessary land can be obtained without cost to the United States."

I inclose and invite especial attention to copies of letters from Gen. N. A. Miles, commanding the Department of the Missouri, and Gen. Wesley Merritt, commanding the Department of Dakota, dated, respectively, February 23 and 25, 1892, in which they forcibly urge the advantage and importance of establishing a post at Helena, Mont.

The annual reports of my predecessors for several years past, as well as reports of the military authorities, show that the question of concentrating larger forces at points of railroad intersection has received thorough and careful consideration, and that such concentration is regarded as highly advantageous to the military service, as it affords enlarged benefits to the troops, promotes among them a spirit of contentment, reduces the tendency to desertion, and secures greater economy to the Government by admitting of reduction in the number of smaller posts and lessening the cost of transportation both of troops and military supplies.

The location of Helena makes it an important point for a large military post. If one is established there, it will be at the extreme northern end of a line of posts extending from the Gulf to the northern frontier, and with the Union Pacific Railroad coming up from the south and the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads running to the north, east, and west, ample facilities will be afforded for the rapid concentration of troops where needed.

It may be added that the necessary site for a new post has already been proffered by citizens of Helena, and in view of the many reasons rendering the measure an important and desirable one, and as being in accord with the established policy of the Department, I fully concur in the views of the military authorities and earnestly recommend the passage of the accompanying bill.

If desired, Generals Miles and Merritt will be instructed to appear before your committee to give further information upon the subject.

Very respectfully,

S. B. ELKINS,
Secretary of War.

The CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AFFAIRS,
United States Senate.

HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT OF THE MISSOURI,
Chicago, Ill., February 23, 1892.

SIR: In reply to your inquiry (just at hand) as to establishing a military post near Helena, Mont., I have the honor to submit the following:

It has for some years been the policy of the War Department (first announced by Gen. Sherman) to abandon the smaller and isolated posts as they become unnecessary, and to concentrate the troops in garrisons of not less than one regiment at posts near telegraphic and railroad communications, in the interest of efficiency and also economical supply: In pursuance of this policy various small posts have been abandoned, and larger regimental posts have been established at Vancouver Barracks, Washington; the Presidio and Angel Island, California; Denver, Colo.; Fort Douglas, Utah; Fort D. A. Russell, Wyo.; Omaha, Nebr.; Forts Riley and Leavenworth, Kans.; Fort Snelling, Minn.; Fort Keogh, Mont.; Forts Sheridan, Ills., and Thomas Ky.; San Antonio, Tex., and Atlanta, Ga., and other places.

I was for some years in command of troops in Montana and also the Department of the Columbia. From my experience and knowledge of the country, I am able to say that Helena is well located for convenience of communication and economy of supply; is healthful, and well adapted to a large military post. The proximity of Helena to the southern frontier of the Dominion of Canada makes it strategically important, as in the case of war with Great Britain an invading force would proceed from that direction to cut the Canadian Pacific Railway with fewer natural obstacles than would be encountered on most points of the frontier line. In addition to this a garrison at that point would be quickly available for use on either side of the Rocky Mountains, and I have the honor to recommend that a military post be established there.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

NELSON A. MILES,
Major-General, U. S. A.

Hon. STEPHEN B. ELKINS,
Secretary of War, Washington, D. C.

HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT OF DAKOTA,
St. Paul, Minn., February 25, 1892.

DEAR MR. SECRETARY:

Referring to your note of February 18th, I am of the opinion that a ten-company post should be built near Helena under the conditions set forth in Senate bill 1881. It has recently been the well-settled policy of the Government in concentrating troops in large posts to place them, all other things being equal, at railroad centers, which are generally the location of the larger towns of the country. This condition is peculiarly well filled by Helena. There we have easy communication north, south, east, and west. Three roads are here available to cross the continent in either direction—the Northern Pacific, the Great Northern, and the Union Pacific. From this point troops can be moved rapidly by rail to Utah, Wyoming, the Dakotas, or to any other of the points where our Indians are assembled. Helena occupies a re-entrant angle with reference to the foreign territory to our north, and is within easy distance by rail of the Canadian Pacific (British) Railroad. This city is in the center of a rich mining and agricultural country. It is bountifully and cheaply supplied with meats and breadstuffs, and fulfills better than any other point on our northern frontiers the condition of being, whether regarded internationally or with reference to our country alone, a most important strategic point.

There are many economic reasons for the establishment of this post which are secondary to those given above. First, its establishment would lead to the abandonment of Fort Custer, which has lost its usefulness as a post; is, because of age, scarcely tenable now, and is most unfortunately located, on account of its distance from railroads and liability to be snowed in for several months each year. As now situated, Fort Custer is the most expensive post in the department to supply. * * * This is also desirable for several reasons, among which not the least is economy.

When I see you, which I hope will be soon, I will be prepared to enter more fully into details in these matters. In the meantime,

I am, with great respect, very truly your friend,

W. MERRITT,
Brigadier General, U. S. Army.