*Lieutenant Buckner and his bride, Mary Kingsbury, in 1850*

*Photo of Lt. Simon Bolivar Buckner and his wife, Mary, from Arndt M. Stickles's* Simon Bolivar Buckner: Borderland Knight. *Courtesy of The Filson Historical Society.*

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# Lt. Simon Bolivar Buckner's Letters to His Wife, Mary, on the Santa Fe Trail, 1851–1852

*edited by Leo E. Oliva*

Serendipity happens. I first wrote about Simon Bolivar Buckner on the Santa Fe Trail more than fifty years ago but never saw these letters until recently. In the summer of 2018, the Kansas City Civil War Roundtable invited me to speak about the Santa Fe Trail and the Civil War. As arrangements were made, it was a wonderful surprise to see that Simon Bolivar Buckner IV was president of the roundtable. It was an honor to meet the great-grandson of the Buckner who served at Fort Atkinson on the Santa Fe Trail from 1851 to 1852 and Buckner IV's father, William Buckner.

After the program, William asked if I had seen the letters written by his grandfather on the Santa Fe Trail in 1851. He noted that the letters are located at the Filson Historical Society in Lexington, Kentucky, and copies are at the Kansas Historical Society. Copies were soon acquired, and William sent me a transcription of the letters. A request to publish them was granted by both the family and the Filson, to whom grateful thanks are extended.

**Simon Bolivar Buckner, Early Years, 1823–1851**

Simon Bolivar Buckner (April 1, 1823–January 8, 1914), the third of nine children (of whom only three survived to adulthood) of Aylett and Elizabeth Ann (Morehead) Buckner, was born on the family farm in Hart County, Kentucky, nine miles east of Munfordville. He moved with his family to an iron foundry in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, in 1838 and was appointed to West Point in 1840. He was a classmate of Winfield Scott Hancock, Alfred Pleasanton, Alexander Hays, and others who became famous during the Civil War. Ulysses Grant was one year ahead of Buckner at West Point, and they became lifelong friends.

Buckner was a strong student in mathematics and history and read widely in military history and literary classics. He had a good memory and later quoted frequently from the great books in his correspondence. He was six feet tall and athletic, excelled at gymnastics, and won the saber championship in his final year at West Point. He was commissioned a brevet second lieutenant in the Second Infantry in 1844 and served more than a year on garrison duty at Sackett's Harbor, New York, on Lake Ontario. He was recalled to West Point in August 1845 to serve as assistant professor of geography, history, and ethics. He assisted with training cadets in gymnastics.

When the war with Mexico began in May 1846, Buckner resigned from West Point and joined the Sixth Infantry for service in Mexico. He joined his company, serving under Gen. John E. Wool, in November

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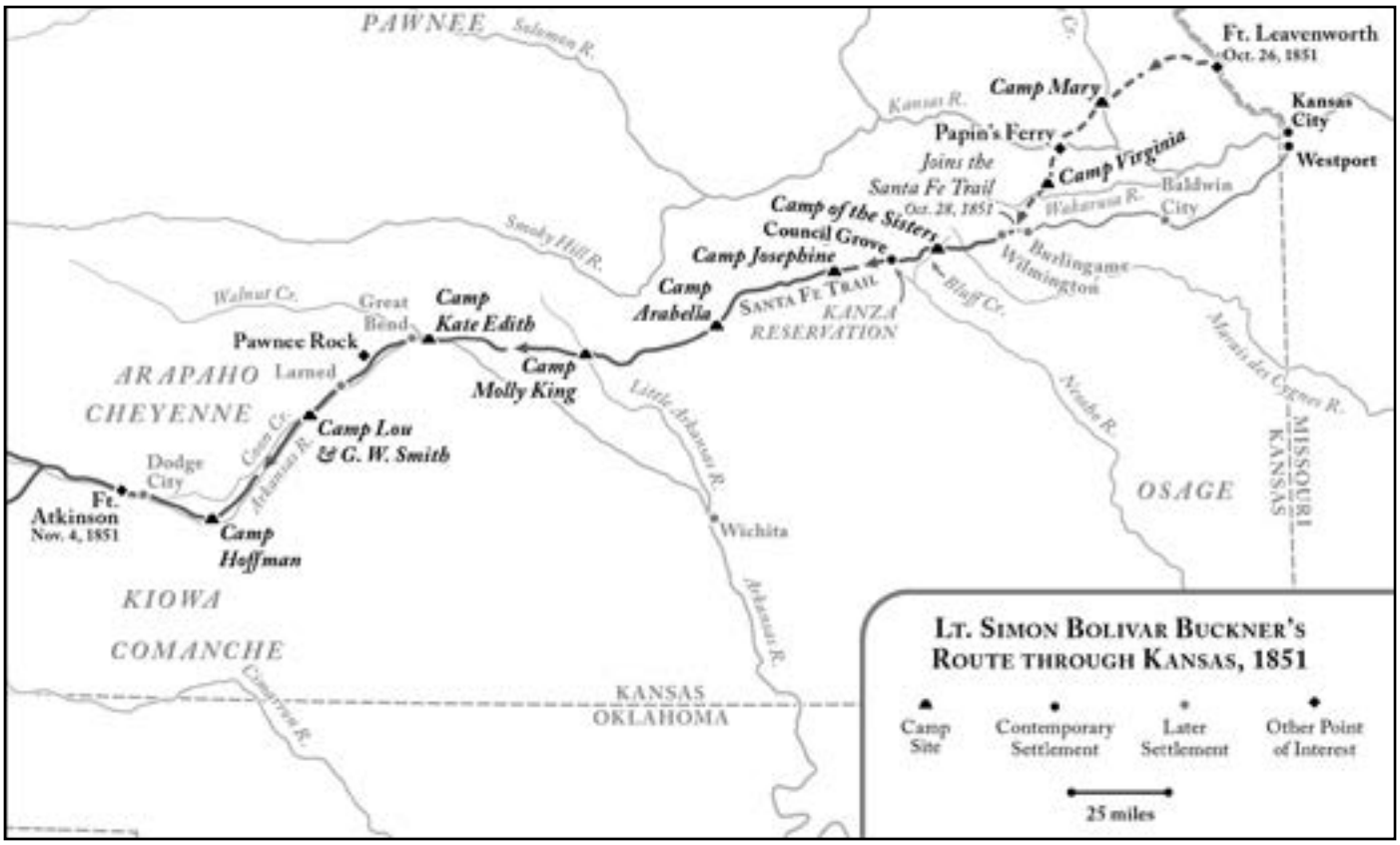



*This map shows the route taken through Kansas by Lt. Simon Bolivar Buckner in 1851, going from Ft. Leavenworth to Ft. Atkinson in a ten-day march, during which time he wrote to his wife, Mary. Also noted here are the camp sites, settlements, and landmarks that he encountered. Map was created by Daniel Huffman.*

1846 on the march west of Saltillo, Mexico. In January 1847, he was ordered to Veracruz, where he joined troops led by Gen. William Worth as part of Gen. Winfield Scott's march to capture Mexico City. Buckner was appointed quartermaster of the Sixth Infantry during the march and participated in several battles, including those at Churubusco, where he received a minor wound, Molino del Rey, Chapultepec, and Mexico City. He received the rank of brevet first lieutenant for his action at Churubusco and brevet captain at Molino del Rey. He remained in Mexico City until after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848. In April 1848, Buckner and Grant were members of a party that climbed Mount Popocatepetl, the second-highest volcano in North America (after Pico de Orizaba in Mexico) and one of Mexico's most active. Grant turned back before reaching the summit, but Buckner and several others made it to the crater. He returned to the staff at West Point later that year.

In 1849, Buckner, along with several other instructors, was relieved of duty at West Point for protesting compulsory attendance at chapel. He returned to his regiment at Fort Snelling, Minnesota Territory. In 1850, he married Mary Jane Kingsbury, daughter of an army officer. In 1851, he was appointed post commander of Fort Atkinson and marched there from Fort Leavenworth via the Santa Fe Trail in late October and early November 1851. Mary did not accompany him but spent time with her family and friends.[1]

1. Buckner's biographical information in this article is from Arndt M. Stickles, *Simon Bolivar Buckner: Borderland Knight* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940).

His letters to her, written on the trail and at Fort Atkinson and reprinted below, provide informative descriptions of the historic route across much of present-day Kansas. The 1852 letter from Fort Atkinson confirms that New Mexican *ciboleros* (buffalo hunters) came as far as present-day Dodge City on their expeditions on the Great Plains.

**Fort Atkinson**

Fort Atkinson, in existence from 1850 to 1854 and located just west of present-day Dodge City, was the first regular-army post on the Santa Fe Trail in the heart of the Indian country. Lt. Col. Edwin Vose Sumner, First Dragoons, selected the site near the short-lived Fort Mann (a small post manned by volunteers, 1847–1848) and assigned troops of the Sixth Infantry to build and occupy the post, which was built of sod. Buckner was sent there to command the post in 1851. He served as post commander from November 6, 1851, to July 20, 1852.[2] On his ten-day march from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Atkinson, he wrote a letter each night to his wife, recounting the day's events. He provided details of the trail and people encountered along the way. His is one of the first descriptions of the military road from Fort Leavenworth to the main Santa Fe Trail, which he joined near present-day Wilmington on October 28. His small party traveled much faster than the wagon trains, thirty-five to forty miles per day compared to fifteen for freighting caravans.

**The Trail Letters, 1851**

Camp "Mary"
Camp on Grasshopper Creek, 36 miles S.W. of Ft. Leavenworth
Sunday evening, Oct. 26th 1851.

My Mary:

As becomes the gallantry of a devoted knight I have bestowed upon the first camp which I have ever commanded the name of my Lady love. It is situated in the edge of a pretty little grove, on the banks of a very pretty stream, with a prairie extending back over gently rolling hills, now lighted up by a stream of fire which displays their forms against the sky. The new moon has appeared this evening for the first time, and shone for a little while on our encampment,—consisting of one tent, one wagon, six mules, one horse, one dog—if Carthon can be called a dog, and four souls, which are made up of one teamster, two private soldiers and one officer, yclept [by the name of] "Simon."

My wagon left Ft. Leavenworth last evening and encamped three miles this side of that place. I awaited until this morning,—my principal object being to receive some sweet intelligence from my little wife by the mail which reached Fort Leavenworth this morning. In this hope I was disappointed; and very much to my regret, I assure you: for it will be a long time before I will know where my letters will find my Mary. Before leaving Ft. Leavenworth this morning I sent you, directed to the care of Capt. [Ralph Wilson] Kirkham [Lieutenant, Sixth Infantry], my pay accounts for the month of September. I have written you heretofore relative to calling on me for funds. I wish my little wife to do so whenever she is in want of money; and to call on me in time for me to furnish her. Whenever you receive a pay-account from me I wish you to let me know. Be particular about this; and also let me know the name of the Paymaster from whom you draw my pay, and the month for which you draw the pay. I sent you a pay account before I left Fort Snelling. Have you ever received it? I hope you have. Let me know, if you can, as soon as you receive this letter, <u>about</u> how much money you will want during the next six months.

2. Leo E. Oliva, "Fort Atkinson on the Santa Fe Trail, 1850–1854," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1974): 212–33.

*This drawing of Fort Leavenworth around the time of Buckner's march west (circa 1840 to 1855) captures the activities of a military post as well as some traffic on the Missouri River. Its location along the Santa Fe Trail afforded protection for travelers and commerce while also playing a role in maintaining peace with Indigenous nations.*

If you can tell approximatively I will try to keep my little wife supplied. I wish to use all the money which I do not send you; but I can always reserve the amount which I wish to send you. If you can tell me the amount you will want I can send you my pay-accounts in advance; and you can then draw the pay as it becomes due, and I can use all the rest for our future advantage.

I have written two letters to you at Chicago, since I received your letter of the 29th of September written in Lyme [Connecticut, her family home]. I hope you will receive them.

I left Fort Leavenworth this morning. It was one of those clear, cool and bright mornings of the Indian summer. The air was invigorating, and the scenery of a Nature to cheer the spirits. All that prevented real enjoyment was that I was leaving one, about whom my heart was entwined in strongest bonds of love. About a mile from the fort the road passes across the range of low hills which half encircles the garrison; and the turbid waters of the Missouri were hidden from my view. The road then winds for several miles amidst low hills and valleys, and over rolling prairie-land embrowned by the coming on of winter; and blackened in a few spots by the traces of fire. The foliage which covered the hillsides was variegated by the autumnal tints; and added to the landscape its peculiar charms. I overtook my wagon at Stranger's Creek, ten miles from the fort. From that point to this, there is no constant stream of water; but water may be found in a few pools about fifteen miles this side of the "Stranger." The character of the country is very similar for the whole distance: an undulating prairie, intersected by a few creeks which cut deep into the valleys, with a good many hills, some of which are wooded, and the valleys uniformly so. The soil is very fertile producing very often the most luxuriant grass;—but the country being still entirely Indian land is uninhabited by white men.

You will form some idea of the country by what it has been compared to,—an undulating country of vast fields enclosed by gigantic hedges.—The Oregon road turns off eight miles this side of Fort

Leavenworth. The distance to this encampment is about thirty six miles. Good-night, my love. It is getting cold, and I must try to sleep sweetly, in order to prepare for the morrow's journey. Sweet sleep be with thee. Simon.

"Camp Virginia."
68 miles from Ft. Leavenworth
October 27th, 1851.

You must perceive, if you have never discovered it before, that I must have a very particular regard for the ladies;—at least for some of the ladies; for I am naming all my camps after them. Unfortunately, however, there are none left after the mornings breaking up, to reveal the name to those who may succeed me.

The route to-day has been very similar to that which I traversed yesterday. The morning was particularly bright, and recalled to mind those beautiful lines of Byron ["Childe Harold's Pilgrimage"],

"The morn is up again, the dewy morn,
With breath all incense, and with cheek all bloom,
Laughing the clouds away with playful scorn,
And looking as if earth contained no tomb,
And glowing into day."

Some of the eminences over which I passed afforded views of the country for an immense distance. All was prairie, rolling as far as vision could extend, and desolate, excepting where some lonely wood scattered along the banks of some small stream appeared, rather to mock the nakedness of the scenery, and to serve as a burlesque, so to speak, of a forest. As an exception to this I met with a very pretty forest of large trees shading the bottom-lands from Soldier's Creek a distance of two or three miles to the Kanzas River. The Kanzas is about twelve miles from this camp. It is about a hundred yards wide, but is so shallow that it could be forded in many places. I met while detained at the Kanzas Ferry [Papin's Ferry at present-day Topeka], Lieut. W. D. [William Duncan] Smith of the 2nd Dragoons, and his lady. They are just returning from New Mexico, and Mrs. Smith appears as if she had seen rather a hard time, and I have no doubt she has. Are you not rejoiced that you have a husband who consents to spare you from undergoing such hardships? Mrs. Smith will possibly see you in St. Louis. I told her to give a great deal of love to you for me; and to tell you that I was in very good spirits with the exception of leaving a dear little wife behind.—After passing the Kanzas River I came in view of an elevated ridge which divides the waters of that river from those of the Osage. It is elevated perhaps three hundred feet above the general level of that country. Eight miles from the Kanzas is a considerable settlement of Pottawattamie Indians. About a mile or two this side of their village I commenced crossing the ridge I have just alluded to; and I am now encamped on a small stream (nearly dry) which is tributary to the Osage. [Given the distance recorded on this day, plus the crossing of Wakarusa Creek the following day, it appears that Buckner had not yet crossed the divide beyond which he would have reached One Hundred Ten Mile Creek, south of the Wakarusa.]

Carthon enjoys the journey thus far. He has discovered the virtue of a wagon when he is tired, and is not slow to leap into it when at a halt, and to coax me to stop it in order to enable him to get into it. Goodnight again: my sweet one.

Simon

Camp of the Sisters (Mary & Mary)
Bluff Creek, 105 ms. SW Ft. Leavenworth
Tuesday evening, Oct. 28th 1851

*Papin's Ferry (also spelled Papan and Pappan) was established by three French Canadian brothers--Joseph, Ahcan, and Louis Pappan--around 1842 as a means for travelers to cross the Kansas River near present-day Topeka. This drawing was made by Henry Worrall in 1857.*

I am reminded by the date that it is just a year since we reached Fort Snelling. I will not dwell on the happiness of those days. We were together then, and that is happiness. To speak too much of it, reminds me of my present solitude.

Three miles from Camp Virginia I passed the white Wahkarussi [Wakarusa] Creek, and at eight and six miles further on two other small creeks, the beds of which are dry, with the exception of holes here and there, at short intervals. Eighteen miles from camp and eighty six miles from Fort Leavenworth, I came into the main road from Independence to Santa Fe [near the present-day town of Wilmington]. I subsequently passed three small creeks at nearly equal distance apart and similar to those above described, and reached this point just after sundown. The distance traveled to-day is about thirty seven miles. The country over which I passed bears a strong resemblance to that described yesterday: but the quantity of timber is perceptibly diminishing. It is no where to be seen except in the narrow bottoms of the creeks; and even there the timber is very scanty. My statement on the first day's march relative to the country when I spoke of its having been compared to a country of cultivated fields surrounded by gigantic hedges, must be very much modified during this day's march. It may rather be styled a country of gigantic fields without any hedges, but only an occasional clump of bushes. As I was coming into the Independence Road I met a merchant train just coming in from Santa Fe. The man with whom I spoke was just in from El Paso; and from him I heard from our friend Col. [Louis S.] Craig who is with the boundary commission.[3] The Col. had but recently returned with his company from an expedition on which nearly all of them were near starving to death. They were some time out of rations and could get nothing to eat, but they finally found their way into camp.

On the summits of most of the elevations over which the road passes, and in the beds of nearly all the creeks, I have observed the appearance of extensive strata of limestone. This formation has continued the entire distance from fort Leavenworth. The last four or five miles of the road winds over a range of high rolling prairie, terminating at this point in a rocky bluff,—and is almost a natural McAdamized road.

Before leaving Fort Snelling, I sent your father's daguerreotype, as well as that of my unworthy self to G. W. Smith, with the request that he would give them to you when you visited West Point. I thought you would be there about the time the miniatures

3. Lt. Col. Louis S. Craig, Third Infantry, was killed by deserters on June 6, 1852, near Sackett's Well, California. *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), July 25, 1852.

arrived, and hoped their presentations would be an agreable surprise to you. I hope you succeeded in obtaining them before you came west. Sweet repose, and pleasant dreams to my Mary. Simon

Camp Josephine,
Diamond Spring, 134½ ms. from Ft. Leavenworth
October 29th, 1851

I was in motion this morning
"all so soon as the all cheering sun,
Did in the further east begin to draw
The shady curtains from Aurora's bed."

The temperature was just bracing enough to render a walk refreshing. I therefore, with gun on shoulder and Carthon playing ahead of me, started from camp in advance of the wagon, and marched at a rate to remind me of my campaigning days. The sun was high above the horizon before my wagon and horse had overtaken me and I had again backed my steed.

The country from Bluff Creek to Rock Creek, a distance of six miles, is very similar to the last few miles of yesterday's road. From Rock Creek to Big John Spring is a distance of about five miles. At the latter spring we descend a steep hill which places us on the bottom lands of Council Grove, which is two miles from that point. Council Grove is a trading post in the midst of the annuity Kanzas or Kaw Indians, and there are about a dozen houses of different kinds here. It may be said that it is the ultra frontier depot of the Santa Fe traders and others who traverse this route. Grain and shops for supplying and refitting trains are kept here.

Council Grove is situated on the headwaters of the Neosho River, (here so small that the water is now found only in pools) which empties into the Arkansas river at Fort Gibson. The day before yesterday I passed the dividing ridge between the waters of the Kanzas and those of the Osage, both which streams empty into the Missouri. To-day I have completed the transit of the ridge or undulating plateau which separates the waters of the Osage and Neosho, and I am now fairly on the waters of the Arkansas. A glance at the map will show you that although I am in a comparatively level region of country I am at a considerable altitude,—the general elevation being, I believe, about sixteen hundred feet. I met in Council Grove an ox-wagon train on its return to the states; and also overtook the train of Mr. F. X. Aubery [Aubry] going out to Santa Fe. He has just passed over a new route from the Arkansas river [which became known as the Aubry Cutoff and Aubry Route] to intersect the Cimarron route from the crossing, and as it was a matter of some interest to the new post I called on him to gain some information relative to it. It is possible you may hear something further from me on this subject at a future day.—When compared with the timber of the country passed over during the last two days Council Grove deserves the last half of its name. It is a grove extending a width of two or three hundred yards along the Neosho for some miles; and for that reason is a favourite stopping place.—From Council Grove to Elm Creek is eight miles; and from the latter point to this camp is eight more. There is a very scanty supply of fuel at either place, but here there is a spring of delicious water bubbling up from the ground at the base of a very low bluff of the prairie. From Council Grove to this place the prairie hills have been constantly diminishing in size, and the country is assuming more and more the appearance of a plain. Pebbly strata of limestone appear at the tops of almost every ridge and at many points of the road. The grass where it has not been burned no longer bears evidence of luxuriance which characterizes it in the prairies east of here; and the desolateness is further

increased by the immense wastes of blackened prairie-fields which are often wet. The weather has been very pleasant during the whole of my journey thus far, until this evening. Just after my tent was pitched a chilly rain came on, which is still beating on my tent while I am writing. It has the appearance however of being only a shower, and I hope the morrow's "Morn Will laugh the clouds away with playful scorn," and give me another pleasant day's journey. Since I have been in camp another slow train has come in, just returning from Valverde in the southern part of New Mexico.

When I left Fort Leavenworth I had some hope of overtaking Mr. [Lt. Henry] Heth [the commanding officer of Fort Atkinson whom Buckner was replacing; Heth continued at the post]; but I have at length given up all expectation of it. He is travelling almost as fast as I am. About forty miles west of here I will be arriving in the edge of the buffalo range: and may then keep a lookout for them, and for the wild Indians of the plains. A thousand kisses for you, my sweet little wife. Simon

Camp Arabella,
Water Holes 174½ ms. fr. Ft. Leavenworth
Thursday, Oct 30th 1851.

The rain which was beating on my tent last night while I was writing was but a shower. The sky cleared away before I went to sleep, and our star shone brightly upon me again. This morning the roads were in fine condition; there being not a particle of dust to incommode us, and the temperature was delightful.

One mile and a half from Diamond Spring I passed a very small creek with a little water and wood: and fifteen miles further on reached the "Lost Spring." The bed of the drain is moist, and by digging a hole a very good spring is found. The water will run in the hole until it reaches a certain height, when it will again find its way along the bed of the stream beneath the surface. Eight miles from Lost Spring is Mud Creek, a truly appropriate name, and about nine miles further is Cottonwood Creek, one of the branches of the Neosho. A small grove of large cottonwood trees is found here; it being almost the only wood on today's march. From Cottonwood creek to this place, where a little water is found in holes, is a distance of about six miles. There is no wood here, and we consequently were obliged to bring enough for cooking purposes from Cottonwood Creek. I met two large trains to-day returning to the States; and with the last one was a number of the beef cattle from Fort Atkinson. Mr. Heth is sending them to the States to winter them. The country to-day has assumed more than ever the characteristics of the plains. The undulations are long and gentle, affording occasionally very extensive views over a nearly level country. The distance traveled to-day has been about forty miles. During the day I passed several broken down cattle, left behind by the trains which have been met, to meet whatever fate may await them. The numerous skeletons of animals which line the road reveal but too clearly what that fate must be when the cold breath of winter sweeps across these naked plains. Simon

Camp "Molly King."
Little Arkansas River, 213 ms. fr Leavenworth
October 31st 1851.

I am now fairly on the "Plains." Scarcely an undulation disturbs the sameness of the scene. Now and then a small creek, or that which is a creek in wet weather, intersects the country which has just sufficient slope to drain the water. Scarcely a sign of timber breaks the desolate appearances of the landscape. One or two stray patches of small

trees appeared some distance to the left of the road about midway of to-day's journey; but they looked so lonely as to appear lost amidst the desolation around them. Only once did any thing like timber appear, as the tops of the tall cottonwoods were seen far in the distance on the main Arkansas. A scanty growth of the same tree is the only wood that is found on this stream. The little Arkansas river is now so small that I can easily step across it. It is nearly dry; but there are one or two small springs of excellent water gushing out of the bank just at the crossing. The bed of the river is so narrow and the banks so high; that I would suppose it would not require very heavy rains to render it impassable for a time.

Big Turkey Creek is the only running stream of water which I have passed since leaving Council Grove until I reached this camp. It is about twelve miles and a half from the last camp at the water holes. About four miles this side I saw the first buffalo that I have met with. Two were grazing a mile or two from the left of the road,—entirely too far to give them chase;—particularly as I am poorly mounted. Little Turkey Creek, now entirely dry, is eight miles this side of Big Turkey creek, and eighteen miles from this place.

About eight miles from here I saw three buffalo grazing a short distance from the road. I pursued them more than a mile; but my horse was not fleet enough to bring me in good firing distance. I nevertheless fired once without effect.

You have no idea what a horrid looking monster a wild buffalo is when viewed at a short distance. They are the wildest and most uncouth looking animal I ever beheld. Their pictures are nothing to the original. After chasing the trio which I spoke of, I saw several bands grazing a mile or two from the road; and one other band was seen about a mile from our camp at sunset.

Major [Don Carlos] Buell, to whom it is said Mrs. Gen. Mason [Richard Barnes Mason died on July 25, 1850] is fiancée [Mason's widow, Margaret Hunter Mason, married Buell on November 19, 1851; interestingly, she is buried beside both of her husbands at Bellefontaine Cemetery, St. Louis], passed my camp late this evening on his return to the States. I learned from some persons whom I met with a wagon to-day that he would be about this point to-night, and I expected that he would camp with me. He is hurrying on however. I suppose I would have done the same thing had I met any one about the 1st of May 1850 [Buckner married Mary Jane Kingsbury on May 2, 1850];—and I presume Maj. Buell is on very much the same business that I was then. I had intended writing a letter this evening to send by Maj. Buell in the morning, but his haste prevents me from doing so.

Whenever we are amongst the buffalo, it is necessary to keep a look¬-out for Indians, for, to use a fashionable term, they fraternize together. I am now keeping watch the first part of the night while the rest of my command are locked up in slumber. Simon

Camp "Kate Edith"
Walnut Creek, 257 ¾ ms. fr. Leavenworth,
November 1st 1851.

I have been travelling to-day amidst a wilderness of buffalo, which blacken the plains all around me. I must have passed several thousand during the day,—the most of them this afternoon. Several occasions were so fair that I could not resist the temptation of giving chase, though my horse is not fitted for sport of that sort. On one occasion, this evening, I got into the midst of a herd and separated it into two bands, though I was unsuccessful in killing any of that herd, I succeeded however in wounding one.

Multitudes of the uncouth animals were

swarming in the vicinity of my camp as soon as I got in. I therefore sallied out with my rifle, and under cover of the bank of the creek succeeded in reaching within a hundred and twenty yards of a portion of a herd of several hundred which were quietly grazing a few hundred yards from camp. At the first shot I brought down a large old bull, one of the lords of the herd. It was my first buffalo, and I felt as proud as a young hunter of his first victory. We selected the choice pieces and left the carcass of the mighty beast stretched upon the plain. It is now one o'clock at night, and the wolves are still keeping up their revels over the body. The howlings and cries of more than fifty of them proclaim their rejoicing over their prey.

I saw several herds of antelopes this morning. Their light and airy motions as they skim across the plains remind one of the fleetness of the winds as they sweep by us. Carthon joined me in my first chase of the buffalo to-day. He kept at my horses heels for a mile and a half while at full-speed, but the instant I fired my pistol, he turned and left me, frightened by the report. As I was far out of sight of the wagon, I had to abandon the chase of the herd in order to pursue Carthon. I presume he has not forgotten the salute on the 4th of last July. Do you remember how he was frightened?

I met to-day with two parties of Kanzas Indians on their fall hunts. To one old fellow whom I met at the Bend of the Arkansas river, I showed your likeness, telling him it was my squaw! He appeared highly delighted, and pronounced it "very good!" The proximity of these bands and others renders it necessary to keep a good look-out for our horses, which accounts for my writing at so late an hour. I have travelled about forty five miles to-day, viz. To Owl Creek (dry) 10½ miles; to Little Cow Creek (dry) 6½ ms.—to Big Cow Creek, 3 miles; to Bend of the Arkansas 18 miles; to this point, Walnut Creek, 6½ miles. At this point there is fine water and sufficient wood. The Arkansas river at this point is almost entirely dry. The bed of the river is about 150 yards wide, and is as dry as powder, with the exception of a space of two or three yards wide where a little water flows to the depth of an inch or two.[4] The rest of the river percolates through the sand. My candle is just about burning out. Goodnight my sweet love. Thy Simon

Camp Lou & G. W. Smith[5]
Coon Creek, 297 ½ ms. fr. Ft. Leavenworth,
Sunday, Nov 2nd 1851.

I have travelled about forty miles to-day,—very rapid marching, Considering that the great Pacific Railway has not yet been completed to this point. The intermediate distances were,—to Pawnee Rock, an abrupt projection of the low bluff which bounds the Arkansas plains, and which seems to be an iron-stained sandstone 16 1/3 miles;—Ash Creek, now entirely dry, but the banks of which are covered with a growth of that beautiful wood, the Ash, 5¼ miles,—Pawnee Fork of the Arkansas, a brisk running stream of fine clear water cutting deep into its banks and thickly wooded for this country; but only about five or six yards wide, 6 2/3 miles;—to Coon Creek where there is no wood, but good water, 11½ miles. About five miles this side of the Pawnee fork another road, about ten or fifteen miles shorter than this route, diverges to the right, leaving the Arkansas river much further to the left; but I thought it advisable to pursue this direction; as, for the entire fifty miles,—that being the length

4. Katie Bowen traveled the Santa Fe Road along the Arkansas River in July 1851 and reported a drought. At Fort Atkinson on July 23, 1851, she wrote, "There is no vegetation whatever, having had no rain for a year." See Leo E. Oliva, ed., "'A Faithful Account of Everything': Letters from Katie Bowen on the Santa Fe Trail, 1851," *Kansas History* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1996–1997): 276.

5. Named for friends Captain G. W. Smith and his wife, Lou, who "was a confidant of his to whom he frequently turned for advice." Stickles, *Simon Bolivar Buckner*, 21.

of the "Dry route," there is neither wood nor water, at this season. My animals would therefore have suffered very much during the day and a half which it would have required to accomplish the distance.

Since I came into the valley of the Arkansas yesterday afternoon, the country has been an almost perfectly level plain, bounded at a distance of only a few miles from the road by a very slight elevation. This plain extends down to the Arkansas, the distance of which from the road varies from one to five or six or eight miles. The opposite bank of the river is broken into low, sterile sand-hills which appear to rise at once from the river. A straggling growth of cottonwoods, very scanty indeed, springs up now and then along the southern bank. The plains on this side seems entirely naked except where some tributary from the north brings with it a narrow zone of timber. In lieu of wood the plain is covered almost entirely with a short and thickly matted grass, now almost white but still very nutritious, known as the "buffalo grass." The immense herds of uncouth animals which range over these plains during the winter usually subsist almost entirely on this grass. The soil seems ill-adapted to sustain anything else—except indeed, some of the species of thorny cactus which remind me of my campaign in Northern Mexico, amidst the valleys of Cohahuila [Mexico]. I have met with several varieties during the last three days;—and my hands have several times been reminded of the care necessary to be used when I wish to seat myself on the grass.

Besides the prairie wolf and the huge grey wolf which are found in myriads on these plains, there is one other animal which makes a more permanent abode amongst them. I mean the little prairie-dog.

*Among the Santa Fe Trail landmarks that Buckner references is Pawnee Rock. Although it was long considered sacred ground to the Pawnee, travelers noted that it was the half-way point on the trail and often stopped to engrave their names. The Woman's Kansas Day Club worked to have it declared a historic site in 1909. Decades later, in 1970, Pawnee Rock was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The site is currently administered by the Kansas Historical Society. The above stereograph image showing a group of travelers is dated May 2, 1879.*

He builds his mud house deep in the earth, and will sit behind the earth which he has excavated and chatter away at any one who approaches, and then dart down into his house a distance of six to ten feet. Carthon has, with his usual inquisitiveness, formed their acquaintances. By the way, I have him chained up to-night. After I wrote you last night and retired I awoke and missed him. I called for some time without success; and it was not until I had several times blown loudly upon my dog-whistle that he made his appearance on the other side of the creek. He doubtless wished to satisfy his curiosity relative to the unearthly revelling kept

up over the carcass of the slaughtered buffalo. It was well that I discovered his absence when I did, for I doubt not the hundreds of wolves who were fighting over the dead monster would have soon made the quietus of our young friend.

The mouth of Pawnee fork, which I passed to-day, was chosen by Col. [William] Hoffman for the site of Fort Atkinson, and it is probable that the post will be removed there in the spring. It is an infinitely better position than the one now occupied by the fort, and the change would be in many respects desirable.[6]

I told you yesterday that I had passed during the day through a wilderness of Buffalo. I would have reserved that expression for to-day, if I could possibly have conceived of the existence of the immense herds which have literally blackened the ground since morning. During the forty miles travelled to-day I have not once been out of sight of buffalo. But band upon band, herd upon herd, myriads upon myriads of the monster animals have swarmed thickly around. I will not venture to name the countless thousands which I have passed; but I think I must frequently have taken in five or six or eight thousand at a glance; and for scarcely a moment of the day have there been less than a thousand in view. But as it may some day be your fortune, I will not say good fortune, to see such wondrous sights yourself, I will not venture to dwell longer upon this theme. But when surrounded by such wild looking beasts, you can best appreciate your distance from civilization, and be convinced of the reality of your isolation. Until yesterday and to-day I could not fully convince myself that I was indeed in the wilderness: but when I found myself in full career, dashing on alone, amidst a mass of those wild looking objects, unable to repress the growing excitement of the chase, I felt that I was indeed in the Far West and journeying towards the setting sun!

I met this evening a train of seventy four wagons just returning from New Mexico. I believe it is the same train which went out with Col. [Edwin Vose] Sumner early in the Summer. Good-night, my own Mary. Dream of him whose thoughts are always of thee.—Simon

Camp Hoffman, Summit of Heth's Mountains
337 miles fr. Fort Leavenworth,
November 3rd 1851.

I am now drawing near the dominions of our respected friend Lieut. Heth, and it becomes one to show him proper respect; and inasmuch as I am to rob him of all these wide principalities, I must begin to propitiate his good will. From my description of yesterday's journeyings you have probably formed a just idea of the mountainous character of this region. The site of the camp is the only elevation I have been on since I descended into the valley of the Arkansas; and it does not rise over thirty—or forty feet above the river. I have nevertheless dignified it by the name of mountain, since there are no other eminences about it which vie for preeminence. A fine spring gushes out of the rock in a little ravine or hollow of this mountain range, and makes this a choice camping spot for a small party. Its desirability is further enhanced by the comparatively pretty view which is obtained here. It is too limited to be grand, and is too bleak and desolate to be beautiful; but its elements are so grouped as to render the view refreshing. Just below, and within a quarter of a mile is the river. It has risen some, so that we obtain the view of water covering half of the bed of the stream. Just opposite is an island perhaps a mile long, on which

6. Fort Atkinson was not moved to Pawnee Fork, as Hoffman recommended. It was later moved to Walnut Creek for a short time in 1853 and then closed. The small garrison was assigned to Fort Riley. The original site of Fort Atkinson served as a summer camp for troops in 1854, after which it was abandoned.

are scattered half a hundred straggling trees. There are also several smaller islands, secondary to the main one and grouped about it. The usually bleak and naked sandhills of the southern bank here retire backwards in a gentle slope covered with grass until a regular outline is presented against the sky. The scene which might otherwise prove too lifeless is made animate by the presence of the herds grazing on the gentle slope south of the river. There are but few of them; so that the scene does not appear very unnatural. Over this closes the day; and the quiet sunset hour arrives shedding its mellow light around, and then dying away into the twilight hour. It wants only the tinkling of bells to convince us that this is a scene in civilized life; and that those herds are the store of the husbandman, and not the prey of the red man and of the wolf.

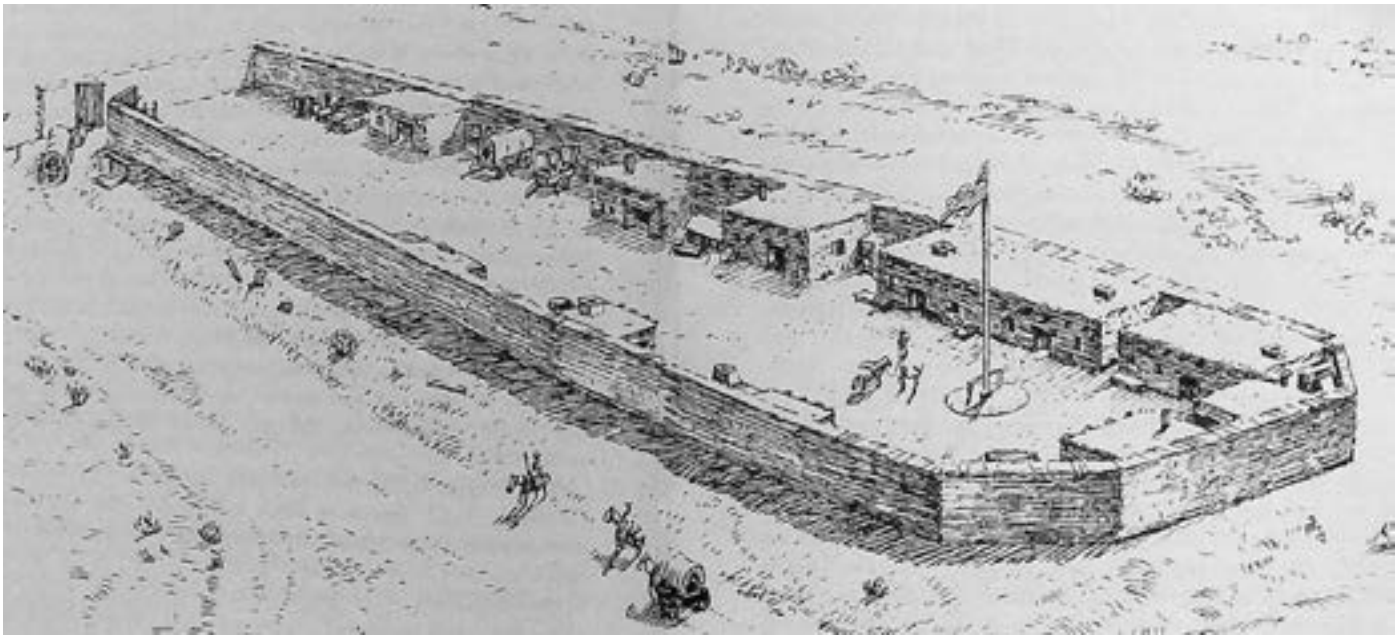
My route to-day has been along the valley of the Arkansas, and generally near the river. The country has become more and more arid during the day; and has been little less than a dry plain of sand, covered with a very thin coating of grass. The consequence has been that although thousands of buffalo have still thrown themselves in my path they have been much fewer than they were yesterday. They are all ranging towards the west. The herds we encountered during the afternoon were generally ranging across from the south bank. It is a very singular fact that a herd will never cross the road in rear of the wagon. If they are a little distance away from the road and desire to cross it, they will always run to cross in advance of a wagon though they may be half a mile behind it, and may have to run several miles to accomplish their object. The herds we have met to-day have evidently not been hunted much. They would sometimes allow the wagon to approach within a hundred yards of them before they would turn from us; and then they would soon suspend their flight.

The Arkansas river has been rising above here. Its bed has been entirely dry at many places during much of the summer. The only way in which water could be procured at Fort Atkinson, was to sink barrels in the sand, and thus form miniature wells. The water now flows over about half the bed of the river, and to the depth, in some places, of about a foot.

We have journeyed about forty miles to-day; but have crossed no tributaries of the Arkansas. They run parallel to the river some miles north of it. This camp is the first prominent point met with after leaving Coon Creek. About half an inch of ice was formed in my camp last night but to-day has been quite warm and pleasant.

Fort Atkinson
359 miles & .09 of a mile from Fort Leavenworth
November 4th 1851.

After crossing the ridge which I yesterday designated as Heth's Mountains, I found the valley of the river had become much narrower, the hills, if the slight prominences can be called hills, encroaching very much on the bottom lands. The width of the valley varied from half a mile to a mile, and the country continued generally arid, with very short and indifferent grass. The buffalo had ceased to range with any constancy in these bottoms, crossing them only to procure water; but several herds were seen grazing on the other side of the river. The slope of that bank has continued uniform, with a regular outline, from the scene which I described yesterday. On this side the low hills terminate, in many places, in steep, rocky bluffs overlooking the plains; and beyond them is a sort of table land over which the buffalo are now ranging. At this point the range of hills again approaches very near the river, and the fort is built on the short slope which intervenes.



*Fort Atkinson was the first regular army post on the Santa Fe Trail in the heart of Indian country. It was established in 1850, the year before Lt. Buckner's command, and it remained in service until 1854. Sketch was drawn by Roy Grinnell and is found in William Y. Chalfant's* Cheyennes and Horse Soldiers: The 1857 Expedition and the Battle of Solomon's Fork.

From Camp Hoffman where I encamped last night, it is a distance of about six miles to what is known as Jackson Island. Five miles this side of that point the Dry route, heretofore spoken of, comes into the river road; and it is about ten miles from that point to this post. The road during today's journey had generally passed over the many very low spurs of the bluffs, which extend down to the river and make a fine, hard, undulating road of very gentle swells. The country is entirely destitute of trees, presenting one naked waste to the eye. Fort Atkinson is situated on the Arkansas river three hundred fifty nine and nine one-hundredths miles by measurement, about WSW of Fort Leavenworth, and "here will I pitch my tent."

I have thus with a feeble pen gone over the route. I have passed along it and sketched its rough outline for my Mary's pleasure. It will afford her some satisfaction, because I have passed through the scenes which I have described; and I will be sufficiently repaid for my writing, by the thought of the pleasure it will give to the dear lady of my heart. So with a thousand fond thoughts and embracing of the heart I will bring to a close this "one fyth [?] of (Simon's) pilgrimage."

Thine always, S. Bolivar Buckner

**Fort Atkinson Letter, 1852**

Fort Atkinson, Santa Fe Route,
May 31st 1852.

My dear Mary:

I am disposed to think that this post must be one of those boiling caldrons which, like that which was tended by the witches in Macbeth, is constantly agitated by the "toil and trouble" which is engendered around it. I alluded in one of my previous letters to our difficulties with the Kioways. They have scarcely been settled, when I am now involved in a difficulty of another sort. I believe however, I meet them with my usual quietness, and

I may even say, patience. The present difficulty is with my old friends, the Mexicans,—now, however, citizens of the same free country with myself. A party of about one hundred and fifty of them have come to this vicinity to hunt buffalo, but as I am not disposed to permit it I have directed them to leave and return to their own country. I think they are not much disposed to follow my advice, and I have learned this evening that they have been tampering with some of the Indians in the vicinity. Fortunately I know very well the sort of persons I have to deal with, for I have met the Mexicans ere now: and as I have heard they have been boasting that they were not at all afraid of us, I intend in the morning giving them an opportunity of showing their resolution, as I intend to make them leave the vicinity of the fort. I have no idea that I will have the least difficulty about the matter, for I am quite certain that Mexicans are never anxious to fight, and I have sometimes seen them run. Gen. [Winfield] Scott's estimate is that one American is equal to about three and a half Mexicans. As we will be in about that proportion, I think, even if we have any difficulty, there is not much fear of meeting with any great disaster, even if we do not achieve a glorious victory. However, I anticipate no great trouble, and am very glad that the opportunity is so slight, for I have at no time any desire to engage in a difficulty of any sort,—especially where our own citizens are concerned,—even though they be what, in common parlance, are called "greasers."

Within the last week or ten days a very novel feature presented itself in this region. We have had incessant rains;—and the river, which was almost dry a short time ago, is now something like river. The faint green which recently tinged the landscape has now burst forth into a decided shade of deep verdure which is most pleasant to the eye; and the huge clouds of dust which were wont to sweep hurriedly across the plains have now entirely disappeared. The change is certainly most agreeable to the inhabitants of the desert, even though we should be subjected again to the return of desolation.

Another change too has been scarcely less agreeable.—The road has been filled with emigrants during the past week, and I have seen some of my fair countrywomen again.—a few of them,—a very few really fair. But amongst them I had the pleasure of entertaining another lady. It gave me pleasure to do so, not only because it is so seldom that my eyesight is blessed with the sight of a pretty lady, but because the appearance of a real lady always reminds me of my dear little wife.

It is pleasant too, to hear now and then the songs of the birds that

"dwell in air,
And steal their notes from angel lyres, or first
In levee of the morn, with eulogy
Ascending, hail the advent of the dawn."

The melody of such minstrels sounds the sweeter to my ears which are now so unused to the sweet sounds. But oh! how tame do their clear voices sound, when I compare them with the sweet music of my own dear little Bird.

June 1st.

As I supposed last evening the Mexics gave me very little trouble this morning. I was not even under the necessity of taking the troops up to their camp, for they moved off towards their homes at a very early hour of the morning, very much to the satisfaction of my Indian friends who, in the event of any difficulties with them could hardly have been prevented from moving under my standard.

If I desired it I could enrol a large number of volunteers for such service.

I have just sent out a detachment of more than

half the company to ruralize for a few weeks, cutting wood on Pawnee fork. Lieut. [John Thomas] Shaaff, who has been here nearly two months, is with the detachment.

Forever, devotedly,
thy affectionate husband,
Simon

**Simon Bolivar Buckner, after Fort Atkinson**

Simon Bolivar Buckner spent a short time on the Santa Fe Trail, but his letters add to our understanding of that historic overland route. Buckner was replaced as post commander at Fort Atkinson in July 1852 and resigned from the army in 1855 to manage his father-in-law's real estate in Chicago. It should be noted that the tributaries of Pawnee Fork in western Kansas were named to honor officers who served at Fort Atkinson, and Buckner Creek joins the Pawnee Fork west of present Burdett. The town of Jetmore on Buckner Creek was first called Buckner. His name lives on in the area.

Before leaving the army, Buckner helped his old friend from West Point and the U.S.-Mexican War, Captain U. S. Grant, by covering his expenses at a New York hotel until money arrived from Ohio to pay for his passage home. Although the two men later fought on opposite sides during the Civil War, Buckner and Grant remained friends.

When his father-in-law died in 1856, Buckner inherited the estate and moved to Chicago. He was appointed adjutant general of the Illinois State Militia in 1857 but soon left the state to return to Kentucky. There he served as captain in the state citizen's guard. In 1860, he was appointed inspector general of Kentucky.

In 1861, Kentucky Governor Beriah Magoffin, brother of Santa Fe traders James Wiley and Samuel Magoffin, appointed Buckner adjutant general of Kentucky. When the Civil War began, Kentucky declared neutrality, and Buckner was in charge of defending that position. When Union advocates violated the neutrality, Buckner resigned. President Abraham Lincoln offered him the appointment of brigadier general in the Union Army, but he refused. Buckner owned no enslaved people, although his father had, but thought states had the right to decide the issue. He accepted the rank of brigadier general in the Confederate Army and was later promoted to lieutenant general.

When Grant's army surrounded Fort Donelson, Tennessee, in February 1862, Buckner sent a letter to Grant requesting negotiated surrender. Grant's response was "no terms but unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted." Thus, U. S. Grant came to mean "Unconditional Surrender" Grant. Buckner was the first Confederate general to surrender an army, and he became a prisoner of war for several months. Grant, remembering Buckner's financial help years before, asked Buckner if he needed money before going to prison. He did not. Five months later, Buckner was exchanged and returned to duty until the end of the war.

After the war, Buckner remained in Louisiana for three years (a condition of his parole). He returned to Kentucky in 1868, took his oath to the Union, had his civil rights restored, and managed his properties. He also edited newspapers. His wife, Mary Jane, died of tuberculosis in 1874. He married Delia Claiborne in 1885, and they had a son, Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., in 1886. Buckner served as governor of Kentucky from 1887 to 1891. He later retired to the family estate in Kentucky, where he lived the remainder of his life and died January 8, 1914. Buckner had been the next-to-last Confederate general to surrender to the Union at the end of the Civil War and was the last Confederate lieutenant general to die.[7]

7. See Stickles, *Simon Bolivar Buckner.*

When Buckner married Delia, they stopped to visit Grant on their honeymoon. Grant was near death, but they had a good visit. Grant recalled that Buckner had climbed to the crater of Mount Popocatepetl in Mexico in 1848 while he had turned back. Grant died a short time later, and Buckner was one of his honorary pallbearers, among whom were former Union and Confederate officers.

At eighty years of age, Buckner memorized five of Shakespeare's plays because cataracts threatened to blind him, but an operation saved his sight. On a visit to the White House in 1904, Buckner asked President Theodore Roosevelt to appoint his son as a cadet at West Point, and Roosevelt quickly agreed. Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., served in the U.S. Army during World War I and World War II, rose to the rank of lieutenant general, and was killed at the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, the highest-ranking U.S. soldier killed by enemy fire during World War II.[8] KH

8. Tom C. McKenney, "Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner's Death," *Military* 17, no. 1 (June 2000): 22–23.