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Unfortunate Emigrants

Kristin Johnson

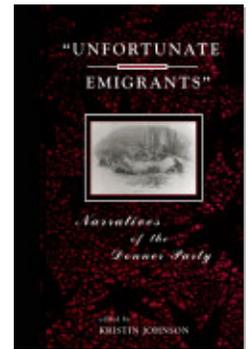
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LILBURN W. BOGGS (1796–1860)

One of the most eminent of the overland emigrants of 1846 was former Missouri governor Lilburn Williams Boggs. Born in Kentucky on December 14, 1796,¹ Boggs emigrated to Missouri as a young man and engaged in trade before entering into politics, serving first as a state senator (1826–32), lieutenant governor (1832–36), governor (1836–40), and again as state senator (1842–46). Boggs is chiefly remembered for his role in the Mormon War of 1836–38, which culminated in the expulsion of the Latter-day Saints from Missouri.

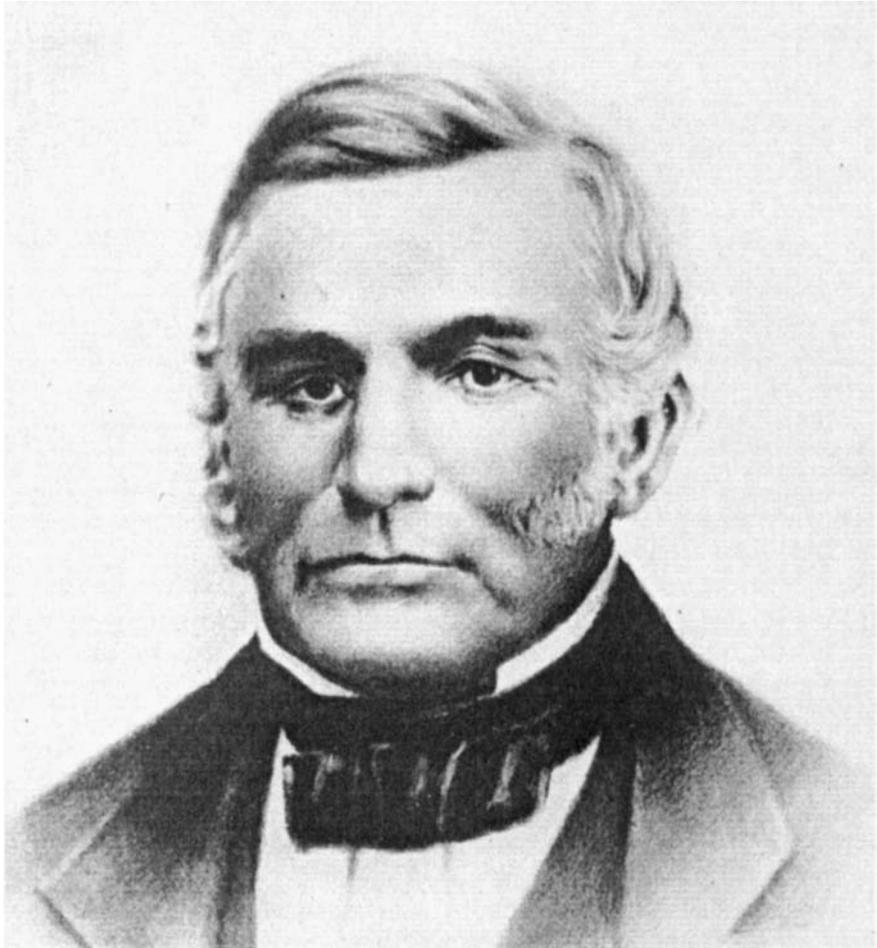
Two years after he stepped down as governor, an unknown assailant—always assumed but never proven to have been the Mormon avenger Orrin Porter Rockwell—shot Boggs in the head as he sat reading after dinner. Miraculously Boggs survived, though he carried some of the shot for the rest of his life.

“Governor” Boggs is mentioned frequently in the annals of the 1846 migration. His immediate entourage included his married son, William M. Boggs, and his brother-in-law Alphonso Boone. Boggs campaigned for the captaincy of the large wagon train which included most of the families in the Donner party, but lost to William H. Russell.

Though he had started out with the intention of settling in California, Boggs grew alarmed at rumors of large companies of armed Mormons heading for the same place and decided to go to Oregon instead. He had intended to take the Applegate Cutoff, but after traveling to its junction with the California Trail he once again changed his mind—the main route had been so arduous and the distance so much at variance with what he had been led to believe that he decided Applegate was untrustworthy as a guide and continued to California as he had originally planned.

Boggs settled near Sonoma after arriving in California and quickly became a prominent citizen, serving as alcade of the Northern District of California until the state government was established. He again entered

¹ Boggs’s year of birth varies from source to source, but 1796 appears most likely to be correct.



Lilburn W. Boggs (1796–1860). © Utah State Historical Society, all rights reserved, used by permission

LILBURN W. BOGGS

trade and profited greatly from the gold rush. Boggs retired to a farm in the Napa Valley, where he died on March 19, 1860.

The Text

The following extract from a letter Boggs wrote to Alphonso Boone appeared in the *Oregon Spectator* on July 8, 1847. The letter as printed is undated, but internal evidence indicates that it was written in early April of that year. At the end of March 1847 an abortive relief mission had been organized but, hampered by soft snow, the rescuers came back about the first of April. Boggs wrote after the return of this party but before he heard of the departure of the fourth and last relief later that month. Though the information he relates about the emigrants remaining to be saved echoes that in a letter by Selim E. Woodworth in the *California Star* on April 3, other details had not been published. Whatever its source, Boggs's information is accurate. He writes familiarly of the members of the Donner party, evidently expecting Boone to remember them.

This letter is virtually unknown in the literature of the Donner party. While not a major source of information, it provides several interesting details about the emigrants. The present transcription is from a photocopy provided by the Oregon State Library. It was reprinted in *Crossroads* 6 (Winter 1995). I thank Will Bagley for bringing this letter to my notice.