

THOMPSON THORNTON ALFORD

1827 KY - 1918 MO

See also the biography of his wife, Martha Ann Yager Alford

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PASSING OF CAPTAIN ALFORD

One among the remaining rare human documents contributing to the history of the development of our country was closed last Wednesday, July 3, when Captain Thompson Alford, 91 years old, was laid to rest in the Vandalia cemetery by the side of his wife, who too, played a considerable part in the emergence of her nation. Her death occurred recently state from primitiveness to civilization and was given extended notice in the Leader.

In his long life Captain Alford saw the wild primeval country change to great fields of ripening grain, and the ox and cart supplanted by thoroughbreds, and in these later days, the automobile out distancing the fleeter horse. The rude plow and the cradle have been superseded by tractor and steam machines, the "prairie schooner" by the last word in elegantly equipped Pullmans, schools, commerce, churches, all the great human activities that engross this great middle and extreme west were made possible by the buildings of men like Thompson Alford. They toiled and made the country's foundation and its blossoming increment is enjoyed as a free gift by a world that in a large measure takes the benefit unthinkingly, not recalling in sober moments the heroes that thought, and heroes in courage made it possible.

The world has developed to an amazing extent. Only in the quality of manhood have we not gone beyond the vintage of the pioneer days when from Kentucky, from Virginia, from North and South Carolina, and the far East came wagon trains, came the single family. God carrying out his purposes by turning men's thoughts and their eyes westward.

Thompson Alford was born in Garrard Co., Kentucky in 1827, into a home of peace and plenty, of many slaves, and many acres of Kentucky blue grass. He came of fighting stock. Two of his uncles were with General William Harrison at River Raisin and Ft. Meigs, barely escaping butchery by the Indians under General Proctor. Edmond Haley, an uncle, was in the war of 1812, and with General Jackson at the battle of New Orleans.

His father, General Peyton Alford was Brigadier General in the Kentucky State Militia, and a man of influence in his part of the state. He was the kind strong man to carry west the banners of civilization, and in 1837 the star of Empire shown for him, and he shortly afterwards started to Missouri with his wife, eight children and a company of slaves, making the journey in wagons drawn some by four horse teams and some by oxen. They settled in Pike Co., on the ground now belonging to the Yeager family. He accumulated much land but died at the early age

of forty.

In the log school house on his father's farm, having a dirt floor and split log seats, young Thompson Alford received his education along with a large number of men and women who have contributed wealth, stability and distinction to this section of Missouri.

Educational facilities were extremely primitive but he made excellent use of what he had and his open, absorbing mind made him an educated man in the broad sense.

In 1849, Captain Alford, being then 21 years of age, left the parental roof and was running a blacksmith shop at Frankford, Mo., a few miles from his home. While there, Dr. Jett returned from California and reported the discovery of gold in fabulous quantities. The blood of adventurous youth was immediately fired. The Pacific slope beckoned with a golden hand. California lay in the imagination an iridescent Golconda. The early months of 1849 were given over to planning and practical work and on the first day of April, four covered wagons left the old Alford homestead at Elk Lick, and the faces of those within were set towards the west, the land of dreams and untold possibilities. The party included Thompson Alford, his brothers, Edward and Albert Alford, Taylor Jones, Hathe Jones, Michael Jones, Steven Jones, Joe Robertson and Tyler Martin.

The staying qualities of Missouri mules were recognized even at that date, and sixteen of these sturdy animals, four to each wagon, were to pull the heavy loads on the long journey. The commissary department was complete and held sufficient provisions to last the party one year.

One item of interest was a keg of alcohol, which, weakened with water, Captain Alford said made one of their most valuable assets in combating the difficulties of the hazardous journey. Three bushels of rice and the same amount of dried peaches were included. Flour was carried in tin cans.

The first stop of their party was at Glasgow where the wagons were loaded in boats and shipped to St. Joseph, where they were met by the men who had brought the mules by land. From St. Joseph the party proceeded to the site of the present city of Council Bluffs. Many other adventurous spirits were congregated here and they formed themselves into a company, putting at their head, Capt. Brolaski, of St. Louis. The continuous rains delayed them here twenty days, it raining on seventeen days of that time. The spring too, was late and it was necessary to wait until the vegetation would be sufficient to provide feed for the mules. When they at last started grass was very sparse and it was necessary to gather the tender, budding twigs of the cottonwood trees.

While waiting at Council Bluffs two of the mules belonging to young Alford and his brothers were stolen, and it took every cent of their money to provide more animals for the journey. This only piqued resourcefulness. Captain Alford had with him his blacksmithing tools and on the journey earned not less than three dollars per day shoeing mules, and upon reaching the end of their journey, they were out of debt and had twenty dollars in gold.

On the journey the wagon train followed the route of John C. Fremont made the year before. They saw many Indians, all friendly ex-

cept a band met at Platte River, which exacted tribute of bread and meat from each wagon. Several herds of buffalo were seen and two buffalo and some antelope were killed.

The course of empire was hardly visible on its way to the west. Very few people were encountered. At Fort Laramie, the Hudson Bay Co. had a few shanties. Days and weeks the company traveled without sight or sound of man. It was wild, wierd and terrifyingly lonely. Vast plains, over-aweing mountains, interminable distances. No doubt they felt their insignificance and impotence. As Frederic Remington aptly puts it "No one ever feels so like a mere human bug, as on the great plains in the shadows of the great "Rockies".

In going up mountains it was necessary for a man to be at each wheel of the wagons, to prevent them rolling back and downward. In crossing the alkali deserts, the party suffered intensely, their tongues becoming greatly swollen.

On August 7, they reached Sacramento. The town was laid off, but only one house was built.

California was found a sickly place. Captain Alford's prospecting was done on the American fork of the Sacramento River. He was very successful, in a short time having over \$2,000 worth of gold.

Cholera was prevalent and his brother, Albert, died of this dread disease. He did not remain in California long. He took passage for home at San Francisco, then a town practically Spanish. He paid \$150 in gold dust for transportation to Panama, making the trip on the ship Havana, Captain Raymond Cubberly in command. It required 50 days to make the journey, three last days being

spent in an endeavor to run the ship into harbor. Passage across the Panama was made on pack mules along the now famous Shagris River.

At New Orleans, Captain Alford had his gold changed into coin of the realm at \$17 per ounce.

It took twelve days to reach St. Louis on the Mississippi, reaching home after an absence of eleven months. Walter Crow, of Pike Co., and James McPike, cousin of Uncle Aaron McPike, returned with him.

When the Civil War came like a thunder bolt on the country Thompson Alford was among the first to enlist, being First Lieutenant in Co. G. under Captain Wilson. After Vicksburg he was made Captain. It was at Vicksburg he saw General Grant, a quiet, unassuming but taciturn man.

Capt. Alford was in the Missouri engagements at Pea Ridge and at Lexington. He was all over the South, Iuka, Corinth, Vicksburg, and severely wounded at Corinth.

"It was terrifying at Vicksburg?" I asked him once. He kept still for a long time.

"You know what Sherman said," was the only answer he made.

When he was wounded and a prisoner at Altoona, Mrs. Alford went to him, being provided escort by General Jackson to the federal lines.

While at Altoon, Sherman made his march to the sea, passing through the town with one column while two passed 15 miles to the north and south.

Federal soldiers were stationed at Altoona and the town was only partially destroyed, but the railroad was wrecked with vandal wantonness. The rails were prized up then at stated intervals, the ties were piled and fired the heat warping the rails so they

were rendered useless. The house in which Capt. Alford lay wounded, shot through both legs and unable to walk, was on fire, the fire creeping up the stairs. Mrs. Alford had gone for help to remove him. Meanwhile he rolled from his bed and across the hall, and had determined to make a rolling plunge down the burning stairway when two federal soldiers appeared, carried him down and laid him on the front porch. He was taken to the country from here where his wife nursed him back to partial health. They were at Salma, Ala., when Lee surrendered.

Captain Alford's life was full of great experiences at the tremendously interesting period of national life. Innately modest, it was impossible to get him to relate these stories of great human and national interest.

Captain Alford was married in 1851 to Miss Martha Yeager and became the parents of four children,

Fielding Alford, Perry, Betty, Alford Evans, Nannie Alford Chinn, and Dr. R. Lee Alford, all of Vandalia.

Captain and Mrs. Alford were very successful in a material way, and in their long life had a varied experience, given much detail recently at the time of Mrs. Alford's death. For twenty-five years they had spent their lives in quiet retirement in Vandalia, surrounded by peace, plenty, and the loving care of their children.

The funeral sermon was preached Wednesday afternoon, July 3, 1918, on the porch of the home, the large shaded lawn being filled with those who did themselves honor in honoring the passing of this link of the new world and the old. Many people were there, and their children and grand children linked together by generations in interwoven human interests.

His lineage: Thomas Thornton 1827 KY¹, Payton 1785 VA², Jacob 1757 VA³, James 1715 VA⁴.