

THE  
**REGISTER**

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OF THE KENTUCKY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Thomas H. Appleton, Jr.  
*Editor*

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COVER: Although personally opposed to war with Mexico, Kentucky's Whig governor William Owsley issued a call for volunteers, observing that "Kentuckians are no laggards in a cause like this." Painting entitled "The American Soldier, 1847," by H. Charles McBarron. Courtesy U.S. Center of Military History/Kentucky Military History Museum.

## A Time of Enthusiasm: The Response of Kentucky to the Call for Troops in the Mexican War

*by Damon R. Eubank*

In 1846, the nation's attention was riveted on the Texas boundary issue. Like many of its sister states, Kentucky favored the position of the American government that the Rio Grande River formed the Texas boundary. Therefore, when news arrived of a Mexican attack on General Zachary Taylor's forces in the disputed territory, the state responded enthusiastically to a call for troops.

This enthusiasm occurred despite Whig prominence in Kentucky and Whig criticism of President James K. Polk's actions on the Texas question. The Whig party, and Kentucky Whigs in particular, had to confront a very delicate political situation. Many of these partisans viewed the hostilities as a war for territorial aggrandizement. Yet the conflict had wide popular support, and Whig politicians were loathe to cast themselves as unpatriotic. They remembered the experience of the Federalists in the War of 1812 and were uncertain about the degree of criticism which the public would tolerate. As a result, Kentucky Whigs remained relatively muted in their criticism as long as the fight with Mexico was perceived as a war for the defense of national honor. However, when the expansionistic motives became clearer, Whigs became more vocal in their criticism of the war.

The governor of Kentucky during the Mexican War was William Owsley, a Whig who had gained fame as a jurist in the Old Court - New Court struggle of the 1820s. Associated with the dominant Clay faction of the party, he had narrowly won the governorship in 1844. Not a good war leader, Owsley, like many Whigs, had difficulty finding the correct attitude toward the Mexican adventure.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Frank F. Mathias, "The Turbulent Years of Kentucky Politics, 1820-1850" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1960), 211.

Despite Whig ambivalence, enthusiasm for the conflict was widespread. Communities across the state promised to do their part. In Louisville interest ran so high that some city factories were forced to close, at least temporarily, because of the shortage of workers. Messengers from Bourbon County rushed to the capital, a buggy accident along the way notwithstanding, to petition for the acceptance of the local unit. A Kenton County unit pleaded for acceptance on almost any terms the governor would grant. In Hancock County, sixty-nine of a possible three hundred men volunteered for service. Kentuckians competed for the opportunity to serve, apparently fearing that a poor response from local citizens would damage community pride and honor.<sup>2</sup>

It appeared that every Kentucky male wished to take up arms. One observer noted that "the question is not who must go, but who cannot stay." For example, Matthew Davidson regretted that his friends had talked him out of going to Mexico. He felt he might have missed an opportunity of a lifetime. Even Robert Wickliffe, Jr., while serving in a diplomatic post in Europe, stated his desire to participate in the war.<sup>3</sup>

On September 6, 1845, General Edmund Gaines of the U.S. Army's Western Division had made an unauthorized request for troops from Kentucky, in case war with Mexico became imminent. Months later, when tensions rose again, he made another unauthorized plea for troops from several states, including Kentucky. On May 4, 1846, he asked the Bluegrass state for two to four battalions for six months' service. The "chivalry of Kentucky" was to report to New Orleans as quickly as

<sup>2</sup>Louisville *Morning Courier*, May 16, 1846; William E. Connelley and E.M. Coulter, *History of Kentucky*, Charles Kerr, ed., 5 vols. (Chicago, 1922), 2: 826; Paris *Western Citizen*, May 29, 1846; George Cutter to William Owsley, May 22, 1846, Military Correspondence, William Owsley Papers, Governor's Papers, Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Frankfort (hereafter Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA); Frankfort *Kentucky Yeoman*, June 4, 1846.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Crosby Shelby to Thomas H. Shelby, June 4, 1846, Shelby Family Papers, Special Collections and Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky (hereafter Shelby Family Papers, University of Kentucky); Matthew Davidson to James Davidson, April 7, 1847, Davidson Family Papers, Filson Club, Louisville; Robert Wickliffe, Jr., to William Preston, September 7, 1846, Wickliffe-Preston Papers, University of Kentucky.

possible. Published in the *Louisville Morning Courier* on May 18, the Gaines letter inflamed public opinion. The governor, who personally opposed the war, had issued a call the day before for volunteers; the quota requested by Gaines was met by May 26.<sup>4</sup> As the governor noted, "Kentuckians are no laggards in a cause like this."<sup>5</sup>

Kentucky's ratio of enlisted volunteers to population compares favorably to that of other American states. Among the slave states, Texas, Louisiana, and Missouri had the highest ratios of enlistment. Arkansas, Mississippi, and Florida also had higher ratios than Kentucky, while Tennessee and Alabama had approximately the same as Kentucky. Among the free states only Illinois had a higher ratio than Kentucky. Most midwestern states had slightly lower ratios than Kentucky, while the Northwest opposed the war and enlisted few men. As the war progressed, opposition to the war mounted in the old Northeast and thus reduced that region's enlistment ratios. Kentucky's response, therefore, was more than adequate.<sup>6</sup>

Since speed seemed to be of utmost importance in such a military crisis, Owsley at once accepted the services of the units coming forward first, without much regard for regulations from Washington or for sectional jealousies within Kentucky.

<sup>4</sup>On May 17, 1846, aware of Gaines's May 4 request, and aware that "beyond doubt" the federal government would call for the "militia of Kentucky" (Congress had declared war on May 13), Owsley accepted the services of the Louisville Legion, a state militia unit, and ordered the group southward. Also on that day Owsley issued a proclamation calling for volunteers. William Owsley to Edmund Gaines, to William Marcy, May 17, 1846, to A.W. Dudley, May 20, 1846, Letterbook, Owsley Papers, KDLA; *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kentucky: Mexican War Volunteers* (Frankfort, 1889), 58.

<sup>5</sup>Federal Writers' Project, *Military History of Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1939), 121; Edmund Gaines to William Owsley, May 4, 1846, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA; Temple Bodley and Samuel M. Wilson, *History of Kentucky*, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1928), 2: 193; July 9, 1846, Executive Journal, Owsley Papers, KDLA; Owsley to William Marcy, May 17, 1846, Letterbook, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>Norman E. Tutorow, *Texas Annexation and the Mexican War: A Political Study of the Old Northwest* (Palo Alto, Calif., 1978), 279, 165-74. Another indication of Kentucky's response compared to that of other states is the number and size of units each state furnished for the 1846 request for troops: Illinois, four regiments; Missouri, three regiments, one battalion; Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, and Ohio, three regiments; Arkansas, Texas, one regiment, one battalion; Missouri, Alabama, Georgia, one regiment; Iowa, one battalion, one company; District of Columbia, six companies; Florida, Wisconsin, one company. K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York, 1974), 72.



*KHS Library Collection*

In May 1846, Whig governor William Owsley issued a call for volunteers. In response, "Kentuckians competed for the opportunity to serve, apparently fearing that a poor response from local citizens would damage community pride and honor."

As the governor correctly observed, "an attempt to fill up each of the companies to 80 privates would certainly create considerable delay in their embarkation, if not more serious difficulties." The Louisville Legion, a state militia unit, offered itself almost immediately after the need for troops was known, and the governor gladly accepted its offer. He took them "in anticipation of a formal call from the War Department at Washington" and ordered them to report to New Orleans immediately. Kentucky Congressman James Bell noted that "your [Owsley's] prompt action in anticipation of the President's requisition" and the "gallant response of our brave and loyal state to that call . . . afford peculiar pleasure to the Kentucky

delegation." However, while some praised the governor's rapid raising of units, others would later criticize him for the way he accomplished the task.<sup>7</sup>

The federal government had always intended to maintain some order and control in the raising of units. Since Gaines had made his request without authorization, Secretary of War William Marcy told Governor Owsley to "take no measures to comply with that call." The secretary also issued instructions about company size and length of enlistment. The new regulations standardized company size at eighty men and the length of service at twelve months. Since Gaines' request had not dealt with company size and had summoned volunteers for only six months, the secretary also provided them with the option of going home if they opposed the new regulations. More significant, the secretary bluntly punished Gaines's hastiness by indicating that he might not accept the Louisville Legion into service.<sup>8</sup>

The rejection of a complete and ready regiment from Louisville would have been a major military mistake for the country and would have created a major political problem for the Kentucky governor. Owsley asked the secretary to ignore the technicalities concerning company size and date of request in order to expedite the raising of troops. The call for volunteers demanded urgency, not technicalities, he said. Repudiation of the Legion would hurt state pride and probably hinder future recruitment efforts. The governor pleaded his case with the federal authorities by stressing the need for fully ready units and promising not to accept any more bodies of troops until federal authorities requested them. Federal officials acquiesced; they would accept those groups which had already started for Mexico. Thus, the Legion left for Mexico in the summer of 1846.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>William Owsley to Gaines, May 24, 1846, to Marcy, May 20, 1846, Letterbook, Owsley Papers, KDLA; Connelley and Coulter, *History of Kentucky*, 2: 826; James Bell to Owsley, May 29, 1846, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA.

<sup>8</sup>Marcy to Owsley, May 18, 1846, A. W. Dudley to Owsley, May 22, 1846, Marcy to Owsley, June 2, 1846, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA; Owsley to Marcy, June 9, 1846, Letterbook, *ibid.*; Dudley to Owsley, June 3, 1846, Military Correspondence, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Owsley to Marcy, May 26, 1846, Letterbook, *ibid.*; Virgil McKnight to Owsley, May 18, 1846, Marcy to Owsley, June 5, 1846, Military Correspondence, *ibid.*



But Owsley's problems were hardly over. Because of the high number of volunteers wanting to serve, the governor faced considerable pressure in choosing units. Local units tried to utilize any method that would help them gain an edge in the competition for acceptance. For instance, an acquaintance from Owsley's home county of Lincoln wrote the governor asking that a unit from Boone County be allowed "to accompany the campaign and share its honors." Everyone seemingly wanted to serve, and many other Kentucky volunteers vowed to reach Mexico "on their own hook" if the governor refused to accept their unit. Many volunteers even attempted to join other units if the local company was rejected, and some spurned companies offered their services at a later time.<sup>10</sup>

Many units criticized the selection process. An Allen County company pleaded for a chance "to see if we can fight," while an Adair County contingent asked that the governor persuade the Federal government to request more troops from the state. A Henry County company stated that only units with native Kentuckians should be accepted. Apparently, some Hoosiers had crossed the Ohio River and joined Kentucky units, and the native Kentuckians resented the extra competition.<sup>11</sup>

Others objected to the method of raising troops in rival areas. A Bullitt County unit was challenged because it supposedly did not contain native Bullitt countians, and a Rockcastle County company was upset because a contingent from Marion County had been accepted even though it arrived after the Rockcastle men. Another group of volunteers from Union County disliked the method by which a rival organization raised troops in the county and pleaded for the governor not to accept it. No matter what he did, Owsley would displease someone.<sup>12</sup>

The War Department requested one regiment of cavalry

<sup>10</sup>John P. Gaines to Owsley, May 31, 1846, Military Correspondence, *ibid.*; Frankfort Kentucky Yeoman, June 4, 1846; George Triplett to Owsley, October 24, 1846, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA.

<sup>11</sup>Robert F. Pullam to Owsley, June 1, 1846, James Wheat to Owsley, May 31, 1846, Silas Hunt to Owsley, July 14, 1847, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA.

<sup>12</sup>Owsley to R.J. Jacobs, Sept. 13, 1847, Letterbook, *ibid.*; James Sayers to Owsley, May 31, 1846, A.K. Long to Owsley, July 30, 1846, Military Correspondence, *ibid.*

# CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS!

## PROCLAMATION BY THE GOVERNOR!

WILLIAM OWLSLEY,

*Governor and Commander in Chief, to the Militia of Kentucky:*

Whereas, I have this day received a requisition from the War Department for the raising and organization of two Regiments of Volunteer Infantry, to serve during the war with Mexico, unless sooner discharged, I do hereby call upon the Militia of Kentucky desirous of engaging in the service of their country to organize themselves into Companies and report themselves to the Executive Department with all despatch; and hold themselves in readiness to march by the 20th of September, on which day it is expected the Regiments will be filled, and the Companies notified of their places of rendezvous.

The details of this service will be found in the general order of the Adjutant General, hereto appended.



In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of State to be affixed.  
Done at Frankfort, August 31, 1847.

WM. OWLSLEY.

By the Governor,

W. D. REED, Secretary of State.

ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE,

FRANKFORT, AUGUST 31st, 1847.

## GENERAL ORDERS.

The accompanying proclamation of the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the State of Kentucky announces to the Volunteer and Militia corps of this State, that a requisition or call for two Regiments of Volunteer Infantry has been made by the President of the United States, to serve "during the war with Mexico, unless sooner discharged."

**THE ORGANIZATION OF A REGIMENT OF INFANTRY WILL BE AS FOLLOWS:**

**FIELD AND STAFF.**—1 Colonel.

1 Lieutenant Colonel.

1 Major.

1 Adjutant, to be taken from the line, but not in addition.

**NON-COMMISSIONED STAFF.**—1 Sergeant Major.

1 Quarter-Master Sergeant.

2 Principal Musicians.

10 Companies—aggregate 947.

and two regiments of infantry from Kentucky, but approximately 105 companies offered their services to the governor. He accepted 30 companies and refused the other 75.<sup>13</sup>

Seventy-nine out of ninety-nine counties in Kentucky raised these volunteer units, with many counties raising more than one company. Even relatively isolated areas in eastern and western Kentucky raised troops, as did areas of Democratic and Whig strength. Both poor and rich counties contributed fighting men. War fever cut across political and economic lines.<sup>14</sup>

Although enthusiasm for service was widespread, the acceptance of units in the 1846 requisition was narrowly based. Counties from all parts of the state offered their volunteers' services, but only the men from a limited number of areas were given the chance to serve. During the first requisition, of the seventy-nine counties offering troops, only fourteen counties actually sent units to the war. The favored counties tended to be in the inner Bluegrass area around Lexington or near the urban areas of Louisville or Cincinnati.<sup>15</sup>

The favored treatment for the Bluegrass aroused indignation in the rest of the state. Traditionally, the Bluegrass had predominated in politics and economic wealth; it contained the most valuable real estate in Kentucky.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it was the center of Whig strength in a very Whiggish state. Owsley, himself a Whig, defended his actions by stressing the need for speed in an emergency; thus he chose units which arrived in Frankfort first. Naturally, the first units to arrive were from the nearby inner Bluegrass. Thus, the militia generals from the central Kentucky region easily filled their quotas before the remainder of the state, which had equal war enthusiasm, but

<sup>13</sup>Marcy to William Owsley, May 16, 1846, Military Correspondence, *ibid.*; FWP, *Military History of Kentucky*, 125.

<sup>14</sup>Statistical data appear in Damon R. Eubank, "Kentucky in the Mexican War: Public Responses, 1846-1848" (Ph.D. diss., Mississippi State University, 1990). See appendix 2 (pp. 151-53) for population of Kentucky in 1840; figure 2 (p. 183) for location of the volunteer units; and appendix 3 (pp. 154-56) and figure 3 (p. 184) for reference to Kentucky wealth.

<sup>15</sup>The inner Bluegrass consisted of all or part of Fayette, Bourbon, Scott, Woodford, Jessamine, Madison, and Clark counties.

<sup>16</sup>See appendix 3 and figure 3 in Eubank, "Kentucky in the Mexican War," for reference to the wealth of these counties.

not an adequate opportunity to respond.<sup>17</sup>

Other parts of the Commonwealth did not unquestioningly and gracefully accept the governor's answer. Many Bluegrass residents quietly noted the unequal selection of troops, but many more western Kentuckians reacted with emotion. A Logan County man wrote Owsley to complain that "our remoteness from Frankfort does not give us an equal chance with the counties near Frankfort" and that volunteers had been accepted from the inner Bluegrass before the news of a need for volunteers had even reached western Kentucky. This Logan County resident felt the western part of the state, the so-called Green River area,<sup>18</sup> "should be allowed to furnish its just proportion of the demand" for volunteers.<sup>19</sup>

Since the Jackson Purchase<sup>20</sup> area of far western Kentucky was the state's Democratic stronghold, the citizens of that region were especially sensitive about how a Whig governor and a Whig state treated their desire to serve this country. In the Purchase the war was very popular, and many wondered why no units from there had been accepted. An irate Charles Wickliffe raised a unit in the Purchase, and when it was not accepted, he informed the governor that citizens of that western district were just as patriotic as those of the Bluegrass and therefore deserved an equal right to serve. Unfortunately for Wickliffe and his neighbors, no units from the Purchase would ever serve in the Mexican War.<sup>21</sup>

The mountaineers of Kentucky were also upset over the governor's choice of units. The men from these isolated areas trusted only leaders of their own choosing. They resented the governor's power to appoint officers over the rank of captain.

<sup>17</sup>Carl R. Fields, "Making Kentucky's Third Constitution, 1830-1850" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1951), 25; Bodley and Wilson, *History of Kentucky*, 2: 193; Frankfort *Kentucky Yeoman*, May 21, 1846.

<sup>18</sup>The Green River area was a common Kentucky term for land drained by the Green River.

<sup>19</sup>William Kinhead to Thomas H. Shelby, June 6, 1846, Shelby Family Papers, University of Kentucky; Covington *Licking Valley Register*, May 30, 1846; B.B. Peyton to Owsley, May 28, 1846, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA.

<sup>20</sup>In 1840, the Jackson Purchase consisted of the western Kentucky counties of Hickman, McCracken, Graves, and Calloway.

<sup>21</sup>Charles Wickliffe to Owsley, June 3, 1846, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA.

In addition, the mountaineers were upset over the Whig newspapers' failure to mention the recruiting efforts in the predominantly Democratic mountain areas. Hence, the number of volunteers from eastern Kentucky was much lower than that in the rest of the state.<sup>22</sup>

The argument about how to accept volunteer units was probably inevitable. The very geography of Kentucky encouraged isolation and individualism. Each area of the state was unique. Without a real sense of unity, therefore, resentments were bound to occur over the recruiting process. One noted Kentucky historian has suggested that Kentucky sectionalism resulted from jealousy of the Bluegrass, traditionally dominant in politics and economics. The rising urban areas of Jefferson (Louisville) and Kenton and Campbell (Cincinnati suburbs) counties increasingly resented the pretensions of Bluegrass-Fayette County (Lexington) leadership.<sup>23</sup>

Despite such criticism, the units near Frankfort were accepted, while others from more distant areas were not.<sup>24</sup> The Whig strength of the Bluegrass counties and the possibility of Whigs' distinguishing themselves may also have swayed Owsley's choices. As several contemporaries noted, the young men of "the best families in Kentucky" and the "leading citizens of the community" supported the war effort. In the governor's view, most of these leading citizens were Whigs, and their wishes should be met. Therefore, although volunteers offered themselves from all parts of the state, only the Whig strongholds sent troops in 1846 and 1847.<sup>25</sup>

The Mexican War brought other problems for Governor Owsley. He was a judge by training and also a cold and aloof person who did not excel in the political arena. He did not have the common touch and was unable to take people into his confidence. Consequently, others often misunderstood his

<sup>22</sup>Paris *Western Citizen*, June 12, 1846; Frankfort *Kentucky Yeoman*, July 9, 1846.

<sup>23</sup>Mathias, "The Turbulent Years of Kentucky Politics," 1-2; idem, "Henry Clay and His Kentucky Power Base," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 78 (1980): 124.

<sup>24</sup>See figure 4 in Eubank, "Kentucky in the Mexican War," 185, for the location of the accepted units.

<sup>25</sup>A.M. Graves to Owsley, May 31, 1846, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA; William Moody Pratt Diary, May 22, 1846, Special Collections and Archives, University of Kentucky.

actions and criticized him. Thus, Owsley constantly seemed to be creating new problems and new enemies for himself instead of expanding his circle of supporters. His handling of Mexican War recruitment was an excellent example of this tendency. This weakness would haunt him throughout his administration and eventually would lead to his downfall as a power in the Kentucky Whig party.<sup>26</sup>

Owsley also faced problems concerning his appointive powers. As governor, he appointed officers above the rank of captain in each of the regiments. Many Kentuckians wished to group the Kentucky units into a brigade and have the governor select a commander for such a unit. Whoever the appointee was would gain considerable advantage in Kentucky politics. For example, Leslie Combs, a well-known Clay Whig and long-time Kentucky militia leader, desperately desired the brigade appointment as a means of political advancement. Several county delegations requested the selection of Combs because he was a leader the men trusted. President Polk, however, balked at the idea of naming another prominent Whig to high command. Kentucky Democrats agreed with Polk. They wanted the governor to appoint a leading Democrat as the brigade commander, and they backed a War of 1812 veteran, William O. Butler.<sup>27</sup>

Owsley was unsure what he should do. A Fayette County delegation petitioned him to choose someone like Combs, because the men would have confidence in him as a leader. Owsley's judicial training influenced him to wait, however, in order to find out whether or not he had the authority to make such an appointment. After all, he had already been burned in his earlier troop requisition argument with the federal govern-

<sup>26</sup>Lucius P. Little, *Ben Hardin: His Times and Contemporaries* (Louisville, 1887), 361; Jennie C. Morton, "Governor William Owsley," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 3 (1905): 21-29.

<sup>27</sup>Dudley to Owsley, June 9, 1846, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA; Mary Crosby Shelby to Thomas H. Shelby, June 4, 1846, Shelby Family Papers, University of Kentucky; Ann Mary Butler Crittenden Coleman, *The Life of John J. Crittenden With Selections From His Correspondence and Speeches*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1871), 1: 243; June 3, 1846, Military Appointments, Owsley Papers, KDLA; R. Foster et al. to Owsley, June 1, 1846, Military Correspondence, *ibid.*; Frankfort *Kentucky Yeoman*, June 11, 1846.

ment.<sup>28</sup>

He may not have fully appreciated the political overtones of allowing a Democratic president to make appointments for predominantly Whig soldiers. In Washington the War Department decided that the governor did not have the power to name general officers. Although some Kentuckians were critical of Owsley for letting state pride and prestige down, others praised him for his prudent and responsible course of action. Kentucky would have some general officers in the war, but they would be appointed by Polk and not by Owsley; they would be Democrats and not Whigs. For example, William O. Butler, a Democrat, not Leslie Combs, a Whig, became the highest-ranking Kentucky officer. Likewise, Thomas F. Marshall, a leading Kentucky Democrat, became a general, while other leading Whigs did not.<sup>29</sup>

Financial difficulties also plagued the raising of troops in Kentucky. Accepting and equipping troops required money which the governor did not have at his disposal. The state legislature was not in session to appropriate the necessary funds, and waiting for federal government action might take a long time. The desire of Kentuckians to serve was great, and no politician could ignore it. Thus, Owsley took a big political gamble. He called for troops and attempted to supply them without authorized funds. Colonel Stephen Ormsby of the Louisville Legion had suggested this course of action as a way to speed up the process of organizing the volunteers.<sup>30</sup>

Luckily for Owsley and for Kentucky, funds materialized. A group of Louisville merchants raised about \$54,000 for the state's use in supplying the volunteers. The group felt confident that the state or national government would repay the sum later. For the moment, however, speed was of greater importance than money. In a similar fashion the Bank of Kentucky offered \$250,000 to the state to cover organizational expenses and trusted that the state or national government

<sup>28</sup>Committee of Fayette Mounted Rifles to Owsley, May 29, 1846, Military Correspondence, KDLA; Louisville *Morning Courier*, May 18, 1846; Frankfort *Kentucky Yeoman*, June 11, 1846.

<sup>29</sup>Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 74, 75.

<sup>30</sup>Stephen Ormsby to Owsley, May 19, 1846, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA.





would repay it later.<sup>31</sup>

Despite such substantial offers, Owsley still worried about finances. He ordered A.W. Dudley, the state adjutant general, to go to Louisville to supervise the spending of scarce funds for supplies. He instructed Dudley to keep a close account of all expenses and to see to the comfort of the troops as best he could. The federal government had not provided the necessary funds or supplies, Owsley told Dudley, and the state had to attempt to fill the void. He would "not permit my gallant and patriotic fellow citizens to be in want." Dudley was to "attend to the procurement of the articles necessary for their subsistence." Unfortunately, Dudley had to wait for the supplies to begin trickling in.<sup>32</sup>

Owsley realized the financial hardship that military service placed on many Kentucky families and requested that the federal government advance a small amount of money to the volunteers to cover this loss and help recruitment. However, in his 1847 annual message to the state legislature, the governor reported that the national government had finally reimbursed the state for its expenses in promptly organizing the Louisville Legion.<sup>33</sup>

The Mexican War brought many other unexpected tasks for the governor, and he and the rest of the Kentucky state bureaucracy were unprepared. These great demands combined with Owsley's aloof personality caused many Kentuckians to become increasingly critical of the governor. He often appeared undecided or confused—no way for a politician to appear before the voters. As Henry Clay, Jr., noted when he offered a company to the governor, Owsley demonstrated obvious confusion about whether or not to take the unit. Perhaps the pressure got the best of the governor. He certainly did not perform well.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup>William Preston to Owsley, May 20, 1846, *ibid.*; Owsley to John Tilford, May 21, 1846, Letterbook, *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>Owsley to Dudley, May 20, 1846, Owsley to Dudley, n.d., Letterbook, *ibid.*; Dudley to Owsley, June 8, 1846, Military Correspondence, *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>Owsley to Marcy, May 20, 1846, Letterbook, *ibid.*; Governor's Message to the Legislature, January 1, 1847, Executive Journal, *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>Henry Clay, Jr., to James Clay, May 25, 1846, Papers of Henry Clay, Library of Congress.

When it became apparent that the war would not end quickly, a second call for troops in August 1847 became necessary. This time the War Department asked Kentucky to provide two additional regiments of infantry to serve for the duration of the war. Fortunately, the governor had learned from his negative experiences during the 1846 requisition. Unfortunately, he had not learned enough.<sup>35</sup>

Owsley attempted to deal with the problem of sectional jealousy by making a conscious effort to choose units from areas unrepresented in the 1846 mobilization. One means of doing this, he felt, was to choose two companies from each congressional district. By allowing all areas of the state to receive a chance for the glory and honor of war, the governor hoped to save himself from much of the criticism he had received earlier. Since most of the 1846 units had come from the Bluegrass, he now especially tried to recruit units from the Pennyroyal and the mountains. He was successful. In general, the governor's policy reduced the earlier strident antagonism about the recruiting process.<sup>36</sup>

This time, however, there was a new complicating factor: the war had not retained the popularity it had held in its early months. Still, Kentucky had little trouble in raising its required units. The quota was, in fact, filled within a month of the proclamation. But the enthusiasm of the previous year was gone. The war had become less glamorous.<sup>37</sup>

The disenchantment of the 1846 volunteer units explains some of this loss of popularity. The early volunteers served in northern Mexico under harsh conditions; stories of their privations filtered back home. The reality of war differed greatly from the patriotic hoopla of enlistment. Very few of the 1846 volunteers reenlisted, and this fact seemed to suggest to observers that military life was not all it had been reputed to be. Most volunteers probably agreed with George Chambers of

<sup>35</sup>Acting secretary of war to Owsley, August 26, 1847, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA.

<sup>36</sup>Maysville *Tri-Weekly Herald*, September 17, 1847; Dudley to William Preston, August 31, 1847, Wickliffe-Preston Papers, University of Kentucky; Richard G. Stone, *A Brittle Sword: The Kentucky Militia, 1776-1912* (Lexington, 1977), 58.

<sup>37</sup>Owsley to Marcy, September 6, 1847, Letterbook, Owsley Papers, KDLA.

Franklin County when he wrote home that he looked forward to discharge and his return to Kentucky. He said that he expected never to leave the state again after his return. The 1847 volunteers, unlike their predecessors, enlisted for the duration of the war instead of a limited term of twelve months. Because 1847 volunteers had this kind of information, they responded more cautiously than did their predecessors in 1846.<sup>38</sup>

Another factor complicating the second recruitment was politics. Kentucky was predominantly a Whig state, so its soldiers naturally chose Whig officers. Since a Democratic president found this fact extremely unattractive, he attempted to limit the number of troops coming from such a Whig baliwick. Many Kentuckians were convinced that President Polk limited the number of their state's volunteers for political reasons. Kentucky's internal political divisions added to the acrimony; Whigs pointed out with great satisfaction that the Democratic stronghold in the Jackson Purchase had not supplied any troops, while the Whig strongholds in the Bluegrass had supplied many. If the Democrats would not serve, the argument ran, the Whigs should at least get their opportunity. The Whigs conveniently ignored the fact that a Kentucky Whig governor had failed to accept any units from the Purchase area. Whatever the argument, politics was not far beneath the surface in the second requisition.<sup>39</sup>

This 1847 requisition called for only two regiments of infantry. The twenty companies raised came from twenty-three counties. Companies from sixteen of these counties had volunteered but had not been represented in the 1846 requisition. Thus, many of the rejected units of 1846 finally received their opportunity to serve in the war.<sup>40</sup> Although the imbalance was not as apparent as in the 1846 requisition, there was still a preponderance of representation from the inner Bluegrass

<sup>38</sup>Stone, *A Brittle Sword*, 57; Bodley and Wilson, *History of Kentucky*, 2: 199; George W. Chambers to his mother, October 31, 1846, Chambers Family Papers, Kentucky Historical Society; FWA, *Military History of Kentucky*, 135.

<sup>39</sup>Shelbyville *Shelby News*, July 31, 1847; Covington *Licking Valley Register*, September 3, 1847.

<sup>40</sup>See figure 5 in Eubank, "Kentucky in the Mexican War," 186, for location of the accepted units.

counties. The 1847 muster, however, included a greater representation from the outer Bluegrass areas, some sampling from the mountain counties near the Bluegrass, but only scattered representation from central and western Kentucky. Still, the governor rejected several units from counties in the Pennyroyal and accepted others from the Bluegrass counties.<sup>41</sup>

Large areas of the mountains, Pennyroyal, and all of the Purchase area were neglected in the acceptance of units. Geographical isolation, sparse population, and Democratic affiliation might explain why the mountain counties once again received poor representation in the new regiments. Democratic party affiliation might have been the reason why the Purchase area did not receive any representation in the second requisition. However, this observation does not explain the rejection of many Pennyroyal units. Since the Pennyroyal was predominantly Whig and the southern "barrens"<sup>42</sup> area was relatively prosperous, probably the best explanation for the refusal of the services of these units was the traditional bias in favor of Bluegrass areas.

Despite the reservations of some of its citizens, Kentucky once again met its quota of volunteers. In 1846, 105 units had volunteered for 30 positions, so 75 units had been rejected. In 1847, there were 20 positions available and, since 32 had volunteered, only 12 units were disappointed. The significant fact, however, was that within one year the number of units offering themselves for service had fallen from 105 to 32, obviously reflecting the considerable lessening of war enthusiasm during that time.<sup>43</sup>

Although war fever had definitely cooled from 1846 to 1847, Kentucky still met its quota obligations easily, sending

<sup>41</sup>Richard H. Collins, *A History of Kentucky*, 2 vols. (Frankfort, 1966; orig. pub. 1874), 1: 55.

<sup>42</sup>The barrens included all or parts of Barren, Warren, Simpson, Logan, Todd, Christian, and Trigg counties. See figure 1 for the location of these counties and appendix 3 and figure 3 for reference to the wealth of these counties in Eubank, "Kentucky in the Mexican War," 182, 184, 154-56.

<sup>43</sup>William H. Perrin, *Kentucky: A History of the State Embracing A Concise Account of the Origin And Development of the Virginia Colony: Its Expansion Westward and The Settlement Of The Frontier Beyond The Allegheny—The Erection of Kentucky As An Independent State, And Its Subsequent Development* (Louisville, 1886), 339.

some of the best men of the state to Mexico. Several other states, such as Massachusetts, were not so ardent in backing the war effort. Several factors explain, in part, why Kentuckians continued to help the war. The conflict with Mexico provided a break from the monotony of everyday life; it was an opportunity for glory and adventure; and it also permitted the volunteers to experience the exotic.

The opportunity to leave the United States and see new sights appealed to many young Americans including Kentuckians. Throughout history war has provided young men with a welcome, temporary break from tedious civilian lives, and this armed clash was no different. Since many males would otherwise probably never have left their home county, the war experience broadened the lives of its participants. In a romantic era, full of sentimentality, military life was the symbol of adventure, glory, and fame. Others found in the land of Mexico an exotic setting which fascinated them. New customs, different crops, and new lifestyles confronted them. Many volunteers fell in love with the foreign land even before they reached it. Some volunteers, nevertheless, felt revulsion at its strangeness.<sup>44</sup>

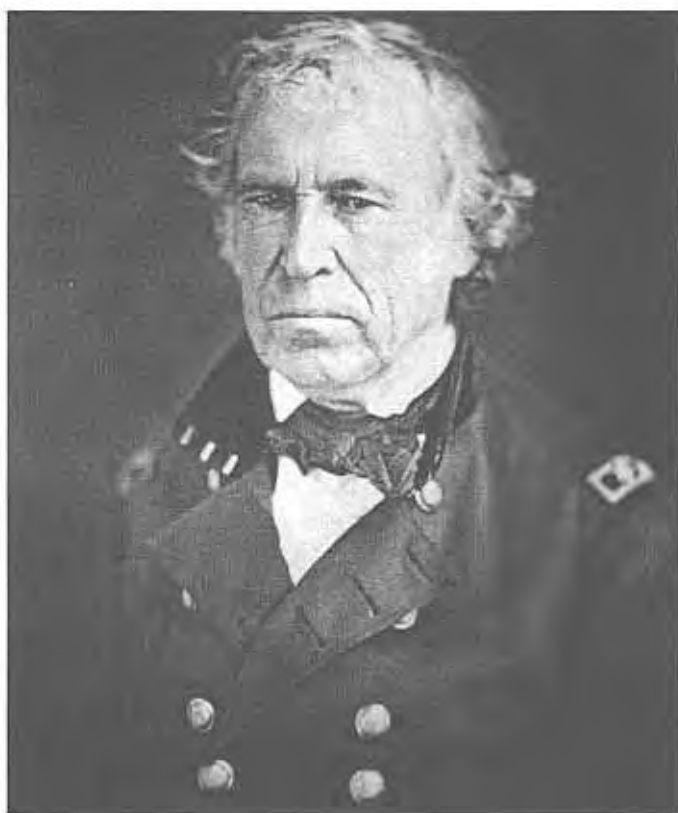
The prominent role of Kentuckians in the war effort may also have spurred Kentucky enlistment. Generals Zachary Taylor, William O. Butler, and Thomas Marshall had Kentucky backgrounds.<sup>45</sup> Other Kentuckians may have been swayed by connections with Texas. For example, some Kentuckians had fought in the Texas Revolution, and many Texans had Kentucky ancestry.<sup>46</sup>

Another possible explanation for the Mexican War enthusiasm in Kentucky was the southern penchant for the military. Historian John Hope Franklin has suggested that southerners leaned toward violence as a solution for problems. The isolated

<sup>44</sup>Gerald F. Linderman, *The Mirror of War: American Society and the Spanish-American War* (Ann Arbor, 1974), 75; Robert W. Johannsen, *To The Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York, 1985), 12, 29; Frank F. Mathias, "Incidents and Experiences in the Life of Thomas W. Parsons, Written by Himself" (Master's thesis, University of Kentucky, 1960), x.

<sup>45</sup>Robert M. McElroy, *Kentucky in the Nation's History* (New York, 1909), 429.

<sup>46</sup>Hugh O. Potter, *A History of Owensboro and Daviess County, Kentucky* (Owensboro, 1974), 81.



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"The prominent role of Kentuckians, such as General Zachary Taylor, in the war effort may have spurred Kentucky enlistment."

rural environment, he said, discouraged taking matters to the courts. The frequent threat of Indian war and fear of slave revolts also encouraged militancy. A high sense of honor, increasing sensitivity over slavery, and satisfaction with the status quo were additional, significant factors. This southern militant attitude was reflected in the southern response to the war. The South provided about forty-three thousand volunteers for the Mexican War, while the more populous North provided only twenty-two thousand. Louisiana, for example, contributed seven times the number of troops than did Massa-

chusetts.<sup>47</sup>

Kentucky fits well into this southern mold. A newspaper editor was correct when he said that "there is something in the very air of Kentucky which makes a man a soldier." Kentucky had two military institutes which thrived during the war: the Western Kentucky Military Institute at Georgetown and the Kentucky Military Institute at Frankfort. Many of the offers of service from Kentucky units contained very militaristic language alluding to the fighting ability of the unit. One Kentuckian wrote the governor claiming that the citizens were a "race of alligator-horse" fighters and ready to "face the enemy."<sup>48</sup>

Kentucky did encourage a military mindset and did honor military heroes. Kentuckians who served in war reaped a decided political advantage in later elections, because Kentuckians had traditionally showed a strong tendency toward electing military heroes. After the Mexican War, many officers, such as Stephen Ormsby, William Preston, and Humphrey Marshall, were active in politics.<sup>49</sup>

Kentuckians may also have supported the war because the Manifest Destiny theories of the 1840s encouraged expansionism like that bringing on the Mexican War. According to this agenda, Americans needed to expand in order to prevent the encirclement of the United States by European powers. Thus, the country acted defensively to ensure its national honor, an attitude Kentuckians supported.<sup>50</sup>

Kentucky's unique slave status gave to Manifest Destiny a different perspective from that of other slave states. To the Deep South, Manifest Destiny meant slavery expansion. In Kentucky, however, slavery was not as profitable as it was farther south. Kentucky landholdings tended to be smaller, and the staple crops of tobacco and hemp did not require as

<sup>47</sup>John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), vii, 7-10.

<sup>48</sup>Paris *Western Citizen*, June 5, 1846; Franklin, *The Militant South*, 154; Jesse Stevens to Owsley, June 22, 1846, Military Correspondence, Owsley Papers, KDLA; J. Ward to Owsley, May 26, 1846, *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>Franklin, *The Militant South*, 156; Thomas D. Clark, *A History of Kentucky* (New York, 1937), 427; Frankfort *Commonwealth*, January 4, 1848.

<sup>50</sup>Frederick Merk, *The Monroe Doctrine and American Expansionism, 1843-1849* (New York, 1967), vii, viii, 3.

large a concentration of slave labor as cotton or sugar. Moreover, Kentucky had always had a small antislavery element. Prominent Kentuckians such as Henry Clay, Robert J. Breckinridge, and Joseph Underwood had long opposed the extension of slavery. In 1833, Kentucky had passed a nonimportation law which forbade the introduction of new slaves within the state. Thus, to Kentuckians, Manifest Destiny did not always mean expansion of slavery.<sup>51</sup>

Kentuckians, as southerners, realized that the annexation of new territory would lead to the expansion of slavery and to increased sectional animosity over the issue. As a border state, Kentucky could lose much more than it gained in any divisive debate over slavery expansion. Kentucky would ardently defend the institution where it already existed. However, Kentucky's support of the expansion of slavery during the Mexican War was tempered by a desire to be perceived as acting primarily in defense of national honor rather than simply supporting slavery expansion.<sup>52</sup>

During the 1850s, Kentucky reflected strong Unionism and opposed the radical southern concept of secession. The state had enthusiastically supported the Compromise of 1850. Later, during the election of 1860, the Commonwealth rejected the prosouthern candidate, John C. Breckinridge (of Kentucky), in favor of the moderate John Bell. Moreover, Kentucky had strong commercial ties to both the North and the South. Thus, the existence of such strong unionist feelings in the 1850s makes it unlikely that many Kentuckians supported the Mexican War primarily for the expansion of slavery. Kentucky had too much to lose in a slavery controversy.<sup>53</sup>

In 1846, Governor Owsley allowed himself to be caught in an internal sectional dispute over acceptance of units, and his actions aroused considerable criticism. A more politically astute governor would have avoided such a problem, but

<sup>51</sup>Clark, *History of Kentucky*, 276, 277; Connelley and Coulter, *History of Kentucky*, 2: 797, 814.

<sup>52</sup>Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York, 1963), 149.

<sup>53</sup>Connelley and Coulter, *History of Kentucky*, 2: 838-39; Clark, *History of Kentucky*, 472-73.



Owsley's cold personality condemned him to trouble. He learned some things from controversy over the 1846 requisition, but he still had problems over sectionalism in the 1847 call.

Governor Owsley could have broadened his political base during the Mexican War. The war provided an excellent opportunity to create a personal patronage group loyal only to him. An astute politician would have seized the chance. However, Owsley's cautious and organized judicial personality let the possibilities slip away.

Owsley also could have conciliated several diverse elements of Kentucky politics during the war. The Kentucky Whigs were not unified in the 1840s. Henry Clay dominated the party but enemies within the group waited for the old warrior to stumble. The governor could have made both pro- and anti-Clay partisans indebted to him by careful choosing of companies. Thus, he could have given Kentucky Whigs a greater sense of unity. However, Owsley did not seize the moment.

Finally, Owsley's favoritism toward Bluegrass counties caused him great political damage. A more prudent course of action would have been to distribute more evenly the acceptance of volunteer units. Owsley's policies only created alienation throughout most of the state.

Several factors enhanced Kentucky's enthusiasm for the war. It was the chance of a lifetime for many young Kentuckians. They could gain experiences that they otherwise would never have had. Young Kentuckians could gain honor and respect from their participation in the war. The militant spirit of the South also offered intellectual, social, and political benefits to the participants. Thus, Kentucky was in the forefront of responding to the Mexican War; it seemed only natural to Kentuckians that it be so.