

It takes more than a good resume to get a government contract.

Walter Washington DeLacy (1819-1892)

From: "Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana 2"ⁱ, 1896.

WALTER WASHINGTON DELACY. Born in Petersburg, Va., Feb. 22, 1819; died in Helena, Mont., May 13, 1892. Leader of a party of prospectors who passed through the southwest corner of the Yellowstone region in 1863, and compiler—with David E. Folsom—of the first map (deLacy's 1870 edition) to show most of the prominent features with reasonable accuracy.



Figure 1, Walter Washington DeLacy in Montana.

He was the son of William and Eliza deLacy of Norfolk, Va. They came of a noble Irish family that had declined on these shores, and young Walter lost both parents while yet a boy. His upbringing was left to a pair of maiden aunts and a bachelor uncle, who did well by him. In fact, his uncle even moved to Emmetsburg, Md., to be nearby while the young man attended Mount Saint Mary's Catholic College (where he specialized in mathematics and languages, French, Portuguese, and Spanish).

Since civil engineering was the career he wished to follow, deLacy's uncle obtained for him an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, but that schooling was denied him through official chicanery. The wrong was soon righted personally by Professor Dennis Hart Mahan, who felt a responsibility to the boy's family. He took

Walter to West Point for tutoring by himself and other officers, thus providing him with what was undoubtedly the finest education in civil and military engineering available in that day.

In the year 1839, while deLacy was working as a railroad surveyor, he was called to Washington to take an examination for a commission in the regular army. With the rank of lieutenant, the young man became an assistant instructor in French at the Military Academy, but he soon resigned that position

to take a similar one with the U.S Navy. Future officers were then schooled at sea and deLacy taught languages to midshipmen aboard ships until 1846.

Returning to his true interest, engineering, deLacy was employed by a group of wealthy men to search for abandoned Spanish silver mines, and he was in the Southwest when war began with Mexico. He took a brave part in that conflict, gaining a captaincy, and during the years immediately following he was employed in the West on a number of Government projects, a survey for a railroad across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the survey of the 32d parallel from San Diego, Calif , to San Antonio, Tex., and hydrographic surveys on Puget Sound.

The latter work put deLacy in position to play a very important role in the Indian war of 1856 in the struggling new Territory of Washington. Governor Isaac I. Stevens made him engineer officer with responsibility for planning and constructing the blockhouses and forts that protected the settlements while the volunteer troops campaigned in the Indian country east of the Cascade Mountains.

Having proven himself as a military engineer, deLacy was given employment on a favorite project of Governor Stevens—the construction of the Mullan Road. He was the man who set the grade stakes for the crews, and, at the eastern terminus, he later laid out the town of Fort Benton at the head of navigation on the Missouri River.

Apparently deLacy's experience in Mexico gave him faith in the mineral possibilities of Idaho and Montana. He followed the succession of stampedes that opened up the northern Rocky Mountains, and it was a prospecting tour in 1863, "with a party he called the 40 thieves" that took him across the southwestern corner of the present Yellowstone Park. There he saw Shoshone Lake and the Lower Geyser Basin, but failure to publish his discoveries adequately prevented his getting the credit his exploration merited.

But there was a valuable result. In 1864 the first Territorial Legislature of Montana commissioned deLacy to prepare an official map to be used in establishing the counties, and his map, published in 1865, showed just enough of the Yellowstone region to whet the interest of Montanans (on it was the lake and the falls of the Yellowstone River, with a "hot spring valley" at the head of the Madison River). The map was periodically improved during the 24 years it was in print, and a copy of the 1870 edition—complete with the route of the Folsom party of the previous year, and extensively corrected to accord with their observations—was carried by the Washburn party of 1870.

In Montana's Sioux War of 1867, deLacy assumed a familiar role when he was appointed colonel of engineers for the Territorial Volunteers. In that conflict he displayed his usual quiet bravery by going to the relief of Federal

troops beleaguered at Fort C. F. Smith on the Bozeman trail. Loading a wagon train with Gallatin Valley potatoes and flour for the famished garrison, he pushed through with a handful of volunteers—despite warnings that the Sioux would gobble them up.

The remaining years of deLacy's life were occupied with surveying and civil engineering. He fixed the initial point and laid out the base line for the public land surveys of Montana, prepared a map for the Northern Pacific Railroad that greatly influenced the choice of a route through the territory, and accomplished a perilous survey of the Salmon River. He was later city engineer for Helena, Mont., and an employee in the office of the Surveyor General there. He worked to within a few weeks of his death.

ⁱ **“Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana 2”** (1896), pp 241-251.