



Marking the Grave of Alexander Culbertson

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MARKING THE GRAVE OF ALEXANDER CULBERTSON

BY CHARLES E. HANSON, JR.

THE student of fur trade history will encounter the exploits of Alexander Culbertson in a dozen journals of the day. Rising to prominence toward the end of the fur trade's golden era, he became "King of the Missouri"¹ before he retired from the service of the American Fur Company in 1862.

Culbertson was probably one of the most generally successful and popular of the many able traders associated with the American Fur Company. He was not only an astute business man who amassed a substantial fortune but he was also notable by the standards of the Indian frontier—a mighty buffalo hunter, a skilled horseman, a handsome and powerful figure in council. His marriage to a Blackfoot woman was noteworthy in that it lasted for a lifetime and produced a family of well-educated and successful children. His word was accepted by the Indians everywhere and his name appears as an interpreter for the Blackfeet in their treaty with the United States in 1855.² A tireless worker, Culbertson expanded the geographical knowledge of the upper Missouri region tremendously while improving the routes of communication between his posts. He blazed a

¹ Robert Morgan quoted concerning Culbertson's successor in Montana Historical Society, *Contributions*, X (1940), 266.

² *Indian Affairs, Laws and Treaties* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), II, 740.



MAY.	
MAY 18.	<i>A True Friend.</i>
<p>NO receipt openeth the heart, but a true friend to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it, in a kind of civil shrift or confession.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">BACON (<i>Essay xxvii.</i>)</p>	
MAY 19.	<i>Right with Wrong.</i>
<p>LORK. — My lords of England, let me tell you this— I have had feeling of my cousin's wrongs, And labour'd all I could to do him right; But in this kind to come, in braving arms, Be his own carver, and cut out his way. To find out right with wrong,—it may not be.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">SHAKESPEARE (<i>1<i>K. Rich. II.</i>, Act iii</i>)</p>	
MAY 20.	<i>Generosity.</i>
<p>FATHER DAM. . . . I have five hundred crowns, The thrifty hire I saved under your father. Take that; and He that doth the ravens feed, Yea, providently caters for the sparrow, Be comfort to my age!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">SHAKESPEARE (<i>As you Like It Act ii</i>)</p>	

MAY.	
	<p><i>Alexander Culbertson</i> <i>Born May 20th 1809</i> <i>Franklin County</i> <i>Green Township</i> <i>Winning Area</i></p>

Top: George H. Roberts and Julia (Culbertson) Roberts, Orleans, who cared for Alexander Clubertson in his last days.

Bottom: Entry by Alexander Culbertson in the McGeachin family birthday book, now in the possession of Mrs. Jean McGeachin McLaughlin, Orleans.

trail from Fort Union to Fort Benton in 1851 which afterward became a well-traveled road, and he brought the first wagon through northern Montana. When Governor Stevens of Washington Territory made a survey for a northern railroad route to the Pacific in 1853-1855, Culbertson procured guides, arranged peace conferences with the Indian tribes along the route, and furnished headquarters for much of the survey work.³ Artists, naturalists, and scientists—quartered at American Fur Company posts, traveled on company boats, and exploring freely under the Company's protection—rapidly increased the knowledge of the region's climate and resources. This protection and assistance also enabled the first missionaries to begin the spread of Christianity before real settlement was underway. Culbertson's skill as a builder produced the first permanent settlement in Montana at Fort Benton, whose adobe buildings served through the decline of the fur trade and were then occupied by the Army. Portions of the walls of this great fort still stand. In 1859 it became the head of steamboat navigation on the Missouri River. The "first settlers" who docked there in later years found many of the Indians already reconciled to the white man's ways, the streams and mountains already named, the routes and trails already laid out for the vast immigration to come.

Knowing something of the fascinating background of this man whose enterprises had been carried on with such vigor over the territory from St. Louis to Fort Laramie and the Montana mountains, I was keenly interested to learn that he was buried here in Nebraska.

I first became acquainted with the fact while reading a new addition to our Museum Association library—Volume X of the *Contributions* to the Montana Historical Society. The book contained an appendix biography of Major Culbertson which told of his death August 27, 1879, at Orleans, Nebraska.

Since this statement contradicted my own impressions, I consulted Chittenden's *American Fur Trade of the Far*

³ I. I. Stevens, "Report of Explorations for a Route for the Pacific Railroad, . . .," p. 1; in *House Document 91*, 33d Congress, 2nd Session, 1855.

West. That authority gave the place of death as "Orleans, Missouri."⁴ The possibility of an error by Chittenden was apparent but still not conclusive. Inquiries were made of several organizations but it became evident that while the more productive part of Culbertson's life was well documented, little was on record concerning his death. Merrill J. Mattes, Regional Historian of the National Park Service, Region Two, Omaha, wrote September 22, 1950, concerning available information on Culbertson and informed us that Orleans, Missouri, did not appear in the *Postal Guide*. A now thoroughly aroused curiosity impelled me to visit the Orleans cemetery in the search for more concrete evidence.

At the time of that first trip I was resigned to the faint hope that I might be able to find a Culbertson marker in some lonely country cemetery. According to the Montana biography, Major Culbertson had resided at the home of his daughter, Mrs. Julia Roberts, and the family had moved to Idaho four years after his death. I knew of several old cemeteries near Orleans but the nearest one was in a very poor state, and with no local descendants to question I had small hope of locating a grave made seventy years before.

First light on the question dawned when I consulted Mrs. Verne Dahlstrand, a local abstractor and real estate dealer. Mrs. Dahlstrand had been helpful before in furnishing plats and descriptions for my engineering work so I asked her about cemeteries in the vicinity. She knew that a Major Culbertson had lived there in Orleans with his son-in-law, George H. Roberts, and that he was now buried in the Orleans cemetery. Most important of all she referred me to Mrs. Jean McGeachin McLaughlin, who had been a lifetime friend of the Roberts family. Mrs. McLaughlin told us that Major Culbertson was first buried in the "old cemetery" one-half mile east of Orleans and had been disinterred and reburied in the new Orleans cemetery some twenty-five years later. Mr. Roberts had returned from Idaho to arrange the removal himself, buying the lot in the name of his wife,

⁴ Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York, 1902), I, 386.

Julia Roberts, the daughter of Major Culbertson and his Indian wife, Na-ta-wis-ta-cha.

I visited the cemetery and found the lot Mrs. McLaughlin had described—just west of the G.A.R. monument. The lot was bare except for a huge lilac bush where the Number One grave should be. A two hour search failed to disclose any Culbertson marker in the cemetery, but that was as it should be, for my informant was sure none had been erected. Then I went out to the "old cemetery," now part of a wheat field. The tall weeds around the abandoned graves made examination difficult and no marker was in evidence there either. However, nothing could dampen the elation I felt at the end of that first day's investigation. There was now every reason to feel that we could definitely prove the big lilac bush to be Alexander Culbertson's only memorial. Evidently Chittenden's statement that Culbertson had died in Orleans, Missouri was simply an oversight in naming the state.

With the gap between Alexander Culbertson's last days and the present thus bridged, I consulted Mrs. McLaughlin in several succeeding visits. She was most helpful and without her detailed knowledge and keen memory the facts could never have been re-established. Every detail that could be checked was thoroughly investigated and found to be correct.

Mrs. McLaughlin is the former Jean McGeachin. The McGeachins were close friends of the Roberts in those early days of Orleans and she told me much that was until now unpublished. Mr. Roberts built a large two story house for his family in the new town and there Alexander Culbertson spent his last hours. The house, as shown in the accompanying photo, has had few exterior changes since it was built. The sturdy walls which echoed the thrilling tales of the old fur trader and felt the reverberation of the first train rolling into Orleans a year after his death betray nothing of their colorful past to the casual passerby.

Looking through Mrs. McLaughlin's family album, I was delighted to find excellent photographs of the various members of the Roberts family and of Fanny Culbertson (another daughter of Alexander). The daughter, Julia Roberts, and

her husband were for a time Nebraska residents and cared for the Major in his last days, so their photographs were selected for an illustration. Also reproduced is a page from Mrs. McGeachin's birthday book with Culbertson's entry in his own handwriting. The book, carefully preserved by Mrs. McLaughlin, offers new evidence to clear some of the confusion as to the exact date of his birth.

Here was a real challenge—a wealth of hitherto unrecorded data on a famous frontier figure and his unmarked grave with its very location sinking into oblivion. We had the information for our Museum files, but what about the people of Orleans? The town had proved to be a link between the romantic fur traders who explored the land and the sturdy pioneers who settled and developed it. It seemed fitting that the community be urged to take its just measure of pride from such a historic spot.

At Mrs. McLaughlin's suggestion I contacted Mrs. William A. Lennemann, an official of the Republican Valley Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, in regard to marking the grave. With characteristic enthusiasm and community spirit Mrs. Lennemann immediately organized a Culbertson committee representing all the local civic organizations and including many people who have proved to be of invaluable assistance.

The movement was organized at a general committee meeting held the afternoon of September 17, 1950. Mrs. Lennemann was elected chairman; Miss Dorothy Mahn, the city librarian, was elected secretary; Mrs. Jean McGeachin McLaughlin, Mr. James McGeachin, and the writer were elected honorary chairmen.

A number of problems were at once apparent. The first of these was the fact that indisputable proof of the grave's location had to be obtained. Several people remembered what their parents had told them of Culbertson's death and burial, but documentary proof would have to be found. Mrs. McLaughlin remembered that the grave was in the lot (No. 896) just west of the G.A.R. monument because her father had assisted at the reburial, but there was no living member of that burial group to make a sworn statement.

I wanted to get in touch with Culbertson's grandchildren and selected Roberts' daughters, Mrs. Taylor and Miss Margaret S. Roberts, because several people in Orleans knew positively that they lived in Boise, Idaho. Letters to Miss Roberts' old address came back unclaimed, but an inquiry to the Boise Chamber of Commerce brought a quick letter from Manager Earl C. Reynold giving her present address and telling us that she was in charge of the State Traveling Library. Miss Roberts was glad to help though she was not in Orleans when her grandfather was reburied. In her letter to the Museum Association on June 20, 1950, she offered this pertinent information, "I do know my father General Roberts had the body removed . . . The lot belonged to my mother Mrs. Julia Culbertson Roberts."

Mr. Harry Mitchell of the Orleans Cemetery Association took over this phase of the work and came up first with the official cemetery plat showing the lot previously identified by Mrs. McLaughlin as belonging to "Roberts." Next the old legal reports of the Orleans Cemetery Association were found to include an official record of the purchase of the lot by Mrs. Julia Roberts. This record was contained in the "Secretary's Report to the Stockholders of Orleans Cemetery Association for the year beginning April 29th, 1904 and ending April 28th, 1905," dated April 28th, 1905. The report is quoted in part as follows:

"I received during the year, from all sources, monies as follows, to wit:—

* * * *
Oct. 3rd, 1904, Julia C. Roberts, Lot 896, \$10.00
* * * *

I have issued 9 deeds as follows;—Elizabeth Keith, John Snyder, L. G. Childs, C. Kluss, Julia C. Roberts, H. Ewan, W. M. Walker, Han Thunnell Estate, and August Sandine

* * * *

All of which is respectfully submitted.

/s/ A.M.Beresford
Secretary Treasurer"

The location of the cemetery lot was therefore established. The fact that Culbertson's remains were removed to this

lot had been positively and independently stated by both Mrs. McLaughlin and Miss Roberts. As further evidence that the reburial was accomplished about 1904, I would like to quote an old newspaper clipping found by the committee:

Notice to Move Dead

To the Friends and Relatives of the Dead Buried on the Southwest Quarter of Section 14 Town 2, Range 19, near Orleans, Harlan county, Nebraska.

This notice to inform the relatives of the dead buried on this tract of land to remove their dead to the Orleans Cemetery before Oct. 1st, 1905, as this is not deeded for Cemetery purposes and I wish to fence the same for pasture.

F.A. Gay, owner.

Following is a list of the dead buried on above described land;

Charles Waterman, Avis Waterman, Ella Williams, Lucy O. Moss, Sarah C. Lawver, John Frehs, Johim Bohe, Harriet Burch, Gertrude Burch, Ellis I. Belnap, Willie Dalrympe. Dalgair Thurston; also four unmarked graves.

It will be noted that Alexander Culbertson does not appear in the list of people still buried in the old cemetery; his could have been one of the "unmarked graves" but that is unlikely for the Roberts family still had many personal contacts there in 1905. Further investigations in old files of Orleans and Alma newspapers may offer some additional evidence, but each positive piece of information obtained by the committee has checked perfectly with existing records in establishing the grave location as Lot 896 and the approximate date of reburial as late in 1904 or early in 1905.

As soon as this first phase of the investigation was substantially completed, the various members of the committee volunteered for individual assignments. Miss Mary Parker, Orleans high school teacher and advisor for the Junior Historical Society, began an exhaustive study of available data on Culbertson. She and her group secured genealogical data which included the correct spelling of Mrs. Culbertson's name, *Na-ta-wis-ta-cha*, as given by one of her sons. She also assembled a great deal of information concerning the Major's travels and business dealings and was generally

one of the group's most successful research workers. Mrs. Lennemann and Miss Mahn contacted the various interested individuals and organizations, ordered several books on the fur trade for the local library, and handled other administrative details. Mrs. McLaughlin, along with other duties, acted as chairman of the Monument Selection Committee.

Nearly everyone was interested in Culbertson's title of "Major." Miss Roberts told us in a letter that her grandfather had not served in any military organization and a research report from the Nebraska State Historical Society stated that no evidence of such service could be found. The title was evidently an honorary one—perhaps as a matter of rank accorded Culbertson when assisting officials of the government in Indian negotiations. Rudolph Frederick Kurz, while a company clerk at Fort Union, wrote in November, 1851, "Mr. Denig says Mr. Culbertson has been named a colonel by his friend Mitchell, the United States agent, and we are to address him from now on by that title. Colonel of what? Here we have neither Regular Army nor Militia. Oh the passion for title among these republican Americans."⁵ The Mitchell referred to was Col. D. D. Mitchell of the Indian Department. Since Kurz was in reality a Swiss artist, unfamiliar with American customs and speech, the "Colonel" might possibly have been erroneously substituted for "Major" in the diary. If this were so, it would shed some light on the title—no other evidence was uncovered.

My own assignment was the investigation of the possibility that Culbertson, Nebraska had been named for our subject. Mr. Mattes supplied the following quotation from A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (1882), "Culbertson derives its name from the well known Indian agent of that name, who died a few years since." The Board of Geographical Names in its letter of October 16, 1950, offered similar information, taken from the *Origin of Nebraska Place Names* by the Federal Writers Project, 1938. An examination of local histories and old survey plats has failed to yield

⁵ *Journal of Rudolph Frederick Kurz*, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 115, p. 221.

anything more definite. I believe there is a good possibility that something will eventually be unearthed to show that the town was named for Alexander Culbertson. The Culbertson's left Peoria about 1868, and evidently went back to Fort Benton, for the Major was there that same year.⁶ Na-ta-wis-ta-cha remained in Montana but Culbertson "traded in a small way and acted as interpreter at various Indian agencies."⁷ It seems possible that he may have done some trading or Indian Service work in western Nebraska for there were non-reservation Indians there in the early seventies. Dealing with Indians had been his life work and it seems natural that he would go back to it, even on a very small scale, whenever the opportunity offered.

Much human interest material came to light during our research in Orleans. Probably the most intriguing legacy of Major Culbertson to the town is the wealth of legend about his home in Peoria. These stories are consistent with many of those already published from other sources. A book could be filled with the descriptions of the blooded horses, the servants, the summer tipi for Na-ta-wis-ta-cha on the lawn, the sacks of gold coins in the cellar, the happy holidays when the girls came home from school, and Major Culbertson throwing coins at turtles in a neighboring stream.

Throughout these investigations the committees received active aid and advice from State Historical Society Superintendent James C. Olson. As plans took shape for formal site marking ceremonies on May 30, 1951, the assistance of the Society was of prime importance. Preparations for marking were carried forward concurrently with the research work I have described. Every civic organization did its part and more. The participation of other interested groups and agencies was welcomed and that participation did much to emphasize the significance of what we were doing.

The Culbertson Memorial has a broader significance than many local historic site markers—it symbolizes the passing of one era and the beginning of another. The memory of this

⁶ Montana Historical Society, *Contributions*, X (1940), 242.

⁷ *Ibid.*



Top: House in Orleans in which Alexander Culbertson spent his last days.

Bottom: Marker at the grave of Alexander Culbertson in the Orleans cemetery, dedicated May 30, 1951.

man who took part in the first phase of economic development in the Missouri River Basin is now being perpetuated as a vastly more gigantic phase of that development is being entered. Irrigation waters will soon flow past the quiet hillside where sleeps "The King of the Missouri."

