

DERBY, GEORGE HORATIO

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DERBY, GEORGE HORATIO (John Phoenix), born at Dedham, Norfolk County, Massachusetts, April 3, 1823; son of John Barton and Mary (Townsend) Derby; married, Mary Angeline Coons (1827-1903) at San Francisco, California, January 14, 1854; children, George McClellan, (Colonel, U.S. Army), Daisy Peyton (who married Major General William M. Black, U.S. Army) and Miss Mary Townsend.

Attended a boarding school near Boston, Wrentham Academy, the Teacher 's Seminary at Andover, an academy at Northfield and Norwich University; Cadet at West Point, 1842-46; Brevet 2d Lieutenant, July 1, 1846, and served as Assistant Topographical Engineer on survey of New Bedford harbor; during the Mexican War he was assigned to the staff of General Winfield Scott and participated in the Siege of Vera Cruz, March 9-29, 1847; ordered by the General to reconnoiter the Mexican positions at Cerro Gordo he, with a soldier, crawled through the chaparral and cactus for over 4 miles until he could view the enemy lines in reverse and sketch a map showing the terrain and the location of troops and batteries; during the battle on the following day, April 17, his horse was shot from under him; toward the close of the fighting the next day he was wounded by a musket ball which he carried in his left thigh for the rest of his life; Brevet 1st Lieutenant, April 18, 1847, for gallant and meritorious conduct in the battle of Cerro Gordo.

On sick leave, disabled by wound, to October, 1847; assistant in the Topographical Bureau, Washington, D.C., 1847-48.

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on explorations in Minnesota Territory, 1848-49; ordered to California he went by steamer via the Straits of Magellan and, after a four months voyage, arrived in San Francisco early in June, 1849; performed engineer and reconnaissance duty in the Department of the Pacific during which he left San Francisco on the 120 ton top-sail schooner INVINCIBLE, with Captain A. H. Wilcox and 12 men, November 1, 1850; arrived at San Diego on the 4th where 10,000 rations for the troops at Fort Yuma were taken aboard; sailed from San Diego November 15 and, after a stop at Cape San Lucas, arrived at Guaymas, November 29, which he describes as, "a dirty place with a dirty population of about 1,500 or 2,000 in a state of wretched poverty. We found the cholera raging, many deaths occurring daily"; left Guaymas December 6, but adverse winds prevented arrival at the mouth of the Colorado River until Christmas day.

proceeding upstream the vessel, which drew about 8 feet of water, soon went aground with every ebb tide; further progress being prevented by shoals, the schooner was anchored on January 3, 1851; that day a number of Indians appeared and their Chief agreed to deliver a letter to Major S. P. Heintzleman at Fort Yuma; after waiting for a reply until the 11th he started up the river in the long-boat with Captain Wilcox and 7 men; on January 13 they met the Major coming down stream in a boat,

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"accompanied by Dr. Ogden and Mr. Henschelwood (proprietors of the ferry)"; they all returned to the INVINCIBLE where arrangements were made to **unload** the cargo of provisions **which** was accomplished by January 28th; his drawings and observations **were printed** in his "Report on a Reconnaissance of the Gulf of California and the Colorado River, 1850-51," Senate Executive Document No. 81, 32d Congress, 1st Session, 1852.

While in California, Derby wrote a number of articles under the pen name of "John Phoenix" that were printed in various newspapers and magazines of that State **which** caused Mark Twain to **name him** as "The first of the great modern humorists"; these writings were published in **New York** in book form as "Phoenixiana or Sketches and Burlesques" of which 26 editions were printed between 1855 and 1890; he was probably the creator of two oft-repeated jokes about the **climate** of Fort Yuma where he wrote that it is so hot that the **hens** lay hard boiled eggs; the other is noted by Twain in "Roughing It".

"There is a tradition (attributed to John Phoenix) that a very very wicked soldier died there once, and, of course, went straight to the hottest corner of perdition - and the next day he telegraphed back for his blankets."

There was another reference to that Army post in a mock **lecture** upon astronomy **in** which he described the planet **Mercury:**

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"It receives six and a half times as much heat from the Sun as we do; from which we conclude that the climate must be very similar to that of Fort Yuma on the Colorado River. The difficulty of communication with Mercury will probably prevent its ever being selected as a military post; though it possesses many advantages for that purpose being extremely inaccessible, inconvenient and doubtless singularly uncomfortable."

Promoted 1st Lieutenant, U.S. Topographical Engineers, October 2, 1855; left California by steamer, October 21, 1856, and went via Panama to Washington, D.C.; while on duty as Lighthouse Engineer, (1857-59) he suffered a sunstroke in Florida, which deranged his mind; granted sick leave December 20, 1859; promoted, Captain for 14 years continuous service, July 6, 1860; died at Flushing, Queens County, New York, May 15, 1861, aged 38; buried _____ Cemetery, _____, New York.

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