

Design Rationale

This website is a digital documentary edition of the Papers of Thomas Claiborne, and will contain his correspondence between 1849 and 1851. The design is relatively simple and classic, since the emphasis should be more on the letters themselves and less on the digital medium. Claiborne served in the U.S. Army and was posted in various places throughout the American West during that time, so the design is meant to evoke his period, location, and purpose.

The logo masthead contains a portion of the 1859 “Map of the United States West of the Mississippi Showing the Routes to Pike’s Peak, Overland Mail Route to California and Pacific Railroad Surveys.” The font chosen for the title is Engravers MT in bold, and its wide capital letters give the feel of a mid-nineteenth-century broadside. The body type is Times New Roman, which is traditional and readable. The background color is taken from the primary color in the map, and evokes the aged, yellowed paper of Claiborne’s surviving papers. The dark blue is the color of Army uniforms during that time, and paired with the dark red also resembles an old American flag. Combined, the map, typeface, and color palette create a simple but thoughtful environment in which to highlight the text-heavy content of Claiborne’s historic correspondence that was written while he served in the Army and was posted in the nation’s expanding West.

Color Palette



R:245 G:205 B:143 #f5cd8f



R:11 G:37 B:71 #0b2547



R:107 G:15 B:21 #6b0f15

A historical map of the Pacific Northwest region, showing the Snake River, Willamette River, and various forts and settlements. The text 'THE PAPERS OF THOMAS CLAIBORNE' is overlaid in large, dark blue, serif capital letters.

THE PAPERS OF THOMAS CLAIBORNE

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Welcome

As a military man during the mid-nineteenth century, Thomas Claiborne served in the Mexican-American War, on the western frontier in the territories of Oregon and New Mexico, and on the Confederate side of the Civil War. His was a life that witnessed many of the century's significant moments, for he took part in both the expansion of the United States and efforts to bring about its disunion. Along the way he also associated with many of the nineteenth-century's important military leaders.

Presented here are the edited papers of Thomas Claiborne from 1849 to 1851, during which time he served at western forts along the Overland Trail and in Oregon Territory. The papers include letters to family in Nashville and New Orleans, as well as military correspondence. The subjects discussed in the letters range from family updates to national politics, and from financial reimbursements to salmon fishing. Altogether, the Thomas Claiborne papers from 1849-51 provide a firsthand account of not only one man's military life, but a broader understanding of one man's place within a larger portrait of American history. His military career during this time was part of important federal efforts to encourage and protect westward migration and ultimately the expansion of the nation across the West. Correspondence from his family reminds readers of other important events occurring at the same time in other parts of the country and even other corners of the world. Lastly, more personal notes about family, friends, and lovers, add a touching depth of character to Captain Thomas Claiborne.

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About Thomas Claiborne



Born on a plantation near Nashville, Tennessee, on June 20, 1823, Thomas Claiborne, Jr. was the son of Thomas and Sarah Martin (Lewis) Claiborne. His father worked as a lawyer and served as a Democratic-Republican in state politics, as well as one term in the U.S. Congress. At the age of twenty Claiborne was admitted to the bar in Nashville, but moved to Trenton, Tennessee, to edit the True American. In 1845 he went to Washington, D.C. where he was appointed a clerkship in the Treasury Department. The next year President Polk appointed Claiborne to Second Lieutenant (he soon rose to First Lieutenant) of the Mounted Rifles for service in the Mexican War, and thus began his long military career.

After the Mexican War, Claiborne served in the frontier service from 1849-61. He rose to Brevet Captain, and in 1853 President Franklin Pierce and Secretary of War Jefferson Davis appointed him Captain in the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen. During his period of service in Oregon, Claiborne married his cousin and neighbor Annie Armstrong Maxwell in August of 1851. The couple had two daughters. Their first daughter Mary Claiborne died at an early age, but Mollie Maxwell Claiborne lived to be eighty-five and appears to have cared for her father's papers after his death. After serving in Oregon between 1849 and 1856, Claiborne served in several Indian campaigns in New Mexico from 1856-61. In 1861 he resigned from the United States Army and enlisted in the Confederate Army at the start of the Civil War, during which time he again rose from Captain to Colonel. After the war he returned to Nashville, where he farmed and briefly served as Marshall for the Middle District of Tennessee. He died in 1911.



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Joseph Lane to Thomas Claiborne

Oregon City May the 8 1850

Dear Claiborne

I have the pleasure to acknowledge the receipt of your two letters. I promised the Indians that you would for a reasonable compensation defend them upon their trial. I would be glad to have you do so, but at the same time, I feel unwilling to urge the Col. to do any thing that he beleves would be detrimental to the service, now if the Col. can permit you to come up, I would be much gratified.[1] The Indians must have a fair trial but nothing must be done in the defence, to delay Justice, they are guilty of a bloody murder and must be hung[2]

Your friend and obt. srvt.
Joseph Lane

Confidential

University of North Carolina, Southern Historical Collection, Thomas Claiborne Papers

1. Most likely referring to Colonel William W. Loring.

2. In 1847 Cayuse Indians murdered Dr. Marcus Whitman, his wife Narcissa, and thirteen others at the Whitman Mission near Walla Walla. Increasing unrest and violence between the Cayuse and revengeful settlers ensued, until a trial was finally held in 1850. Five Cayuse men were tried beginning on May 22. Secretary Pritchett, R. B. Reynolds, and Captain Thomas Claiborne acted as the defense in the case. Two to three hundred people attended the trial and heard the jury's guilty verdict on May 23. The five men were executed on June 3. See Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Oregon*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: The History Company, 1888), 2: 92-100.