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Connor H. Richardson  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Camels In North America: The Effects of Islam & Globalism on U.S. State Law

## **Abstract**

A paper detailing the introduction of camels to the U.S in the 1850s as part of an army experiment and their effect of Nevada's state laws.

## **Keywords**

Camels, United States, History, Nevada

## **Disciplines**

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Connor Richardson  
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Camels In North America  
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<http://www.stupidlaws.com/it-is-illegal-to-drive-a-camel-on-the-highway/>

There is a common perception that laws are passed to address a specific grievance. Murder, drunkenness, fraud, and so on, are offenses that almost always have a law - or laws - addressing them and laying out consequences. There are, however, laws that have been passed that some would consider interesting, or even stupid. For instance, there is a law in the U.S. state of Nevada that stipulates “It is illegal to drive a camel on the highway,”<sup>1</sup> and is present in many “dumb laws” websites. Considering the notion, however, that laws are only passed to address problems, it begs the question: why was this law enacted? Why are camels on the highway dangerous? *Are* there camels in Nevada? If so, where did they come from? Research on the topic does indeed show that the law was passed for a reason, and reveals a story in the annals of American history that has been all but forgotten. Lost in the whirlwind of contemporary events, the introduction of camels to the U.S. is not only a tale about an experiment, but is also a lesson as to the influences of globalism and Islam. The camel, a quintessential image regarding the religion of Islam, flowed through the global trade networks, and left such an impression that the state of Nevada passed legislation against them specifically.

The official introduction of camels in the U.S. was an experiment. During the 1850’s, pressure was building from the new state of California for an official “wagon road” from the eastern states.<sup>2</sup> This was before the transcontinental railroad, when traveling across the U.S. required months of travel by land or by sea. Such a highway would facilitate the movement of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dumblaws.com/laws/united-states/nevada>

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Thompson, *Edward F. Beale and the American West*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), p. 104. In 1856, a Californian memorial reached Congress demanding such a highway. It contained 60,000 signatures.

people and goods to and from the west coast, providing travelers with a well-known and relatively safe route. In early 1857, Congress passed a bill authorizing funds for three separate expeditions to map out potential routes to California. Two routes were controlled by the Interior Department. The third, however, running through Arizona and New Mexico in the Southwest, would be overseen by the War Department.<sup>3</sup> It is likely that this appropriation happened because of the Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, wishing to use this opportunity to conduct an experiment as to the importing of camels into the country. Not only would it create a new avenue of commerce, but it would allow Davis to test his theory that camels would revolutionize transportation in the deserts of the Southwest.<sup>4</sup> The coincidence of these two events - the bill authorizing the road and the Secretary of War's experiment - is nothing short of serendipity; the creation of the trail and the prowess of the camel, displayed together, could start a new era of transportation in America.

Davis's camel experiment, however, had been underway long before the road project was enacted. In 1852, a traveler named George Glidden submitted a paper to the Senate, extolling the qualities of the dromedary camel based on his extensive experience with them. This eventually came to the attention of Davis, who requested funds in 1853 for an experiment to test the usefulness of the camel for the U.S. military in desert conditions.<sup>5</sup> While the prudence of such a

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald Thompson, *Edward F. Beale and the American West*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), p. 104.

<sup>4</sup> *Uncle Sam's Camels: The Journal of May Humphreys Stacey Supplemented by the Report of Edward Fitzgerald Beale*, edited by Louis Burt Lesley, (1857-1858), (San Marino, Huntington Library Press, second printing, 2006), p. vi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

proposal is evident, considering the intended region, it is strange that little pause seems to have been given over the political aspect of the animals. Camels were stereotypically from Arabia and North Africa, regions that were predominantly Muslim. Considering the religious differences between Christians and Muslims, the fact that money was set aside by the U.S. Senate to purchase camels and hire handlers from the Levant (part of the Ottoman Empire at the time) in 1855 is miraculous.<sup>6</sup> This expounds on the state of world trade at the time; that traders could overlook their religious differences - despite past, violent disputes - and do business. Money seems to have that effect on people sometimes. As the camel-traders handed over the beasts, it is unlikely they could have guessed the long-term impact they would have in their new home across the Atlantic.

The camels arrived at the Americas in May, 1856, where they were driven to Camp Verde, Texas. The new Secretary of War, John Floyd, embraced his predecessor's experiment, aiding the expedition's preparation.<sup>7</sup> Headed by Major Edward Beale, the caravan contained wagons, mules and horses, as well as camels. On June 25, 1857, the caravan moved out from San Antonio; their destination was Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup> Like the camel trains of Arabia and the Levant, the expedition trekked across the arid, desertlike stretches of the Southwest. The tradition of using camels as beasts of burden appeared to have transitioned well in a part of the world where none existed. News of Beale's coming preceded him in Los Angeles, and the

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<sup>6</sup> *Uncle Sam's Camels: The Journal of May Humphreys Stacey Supplemented by the Report of Edward Fitzgerald Beale*, edited by Louis Burt Lesley, (1857-1858), (San Marino: Huntington Library Press, second printing, 2006), p. vi.

<sup>7</sup> Odie Faulk, *The U.S. Camel Corps: an Army Experiment*, (Oxford University Press, Inc., 1976), pp. 95-97.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Thompson, *Edward F. Beale and the American West*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), pp. 105-110.

caravan lumbered into town on November 9, 1857, amidst much excitement. Beale himself related that not one camel or man was lost, and that the journey was a “perfect and brilliant success from beginning to end.” He even estimated that, if he had his mules replaced with camels, he could have averaged around forty miles a day.<sup>9</sup> With a resounding success such as this, coupled with Beale’s report speaking nothing but praise, it seemed as if a revolution in transportation was in the making.

If that was the case, then why has this experiment been almost completely forgotten? The answer lies within contemporary events. This was the same time period as the infamous “antebellum” period - the political and military buildup - of the American Civil War. That by itself diminishes the importance; who would care about a small transportation experiment when compared to an event that would come to shape a nation? When war finally came in the 1860’s, the state of Texas seceded from the U.S., and seized the remaining camel in the state.<sup>10</sup> After the war, the U.S. government recaptured the camels in Texas (the ones in California were never threatened), but saw no reason to continue funding a program supported by Jefferson Davis, who had become the Secessionist’s President. The camel herds were auctioned off, sold to zoos, circuses, and mine owners, or simply turned loose in the wilds.<sup>11</sup> Thus the chain of world

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<sup>9</sup> Gerald Thompson, *Edward F. Beale and the American West*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), pp. 108-110. Forty miles a day, for a caravan of that size, would be extremely fast; almost double that of their original estimated speed.

<sup>10</sup> Odie Faulk, *The U.S. Camel Corps: an Army Experiment*, (Oxford University Press, Inc., 1976), pp. 154-155. The Texans, however, did not know what to do with the camels. So, instead of putting them to military use, they simply kept them in San Antonio and offered rides to the local families.

<sup>11</sup> *Uncle Sam’s Camels: The Journal of May Humphreys Stacey Supplemented by the Report of Edward Fitzgerald Beale*, edited by Louis Burt Lesley, (1857-1858), (San Marino: Huntington Library Press, second printing, 2006), p. xiii

commerce dispersed the herds further afield, scattering them to the corners of the American West.

Thus camels all but disappeared from the popular image. Many of the camels that made it to California were sold to men who drove them to Nevada for mining interests. The constant toil, however, coupled with mistreatment by the mine owners, caused the camels to quickly wear out and lose their usefulness. The battered animals were then turned loose to fend for themselves, something they excelled at. These errant camels roamed the countryside, their visage and scent spooking horses and mules along the state's road system. This led the state legislature to pass a law in 1875 entitled "An Act to prohibit camels and dromedaries from running at large on or about the public highways of the State of Nevada."<sup>12</sup> Laws are passed to address a specific issue and, in this case, the law was aimed at protecting travelers, whose horses or mules could panic in the presence of a camel, making them traffic hazards!

The world in the nineteenth century was defined by globalism. The transferring of ideas, goods and people has always influenced those who receive them, whether that is intended or not. The Muslim camel-traders sold their charges to the Americans for Davis's experiment, not knowing - or even perhaps caring - that they would be shipped across the ocean. From there, the camels would present a marvel to the war department, displaying their superiority as beast of burden, only to be forgotten amidst a war. Auctioned off and sold privately, these animals were dispersed, mistreated, and finally released into the wild, where they banded together in the desert, and their presence became so troublesome that the Nevada state legislature passed a law

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<sup>12</sup> Odie Faulk, *The U.S. Camel Corps: an Army Experiment*, (Oxford University Press, Inc., 1976), p. 164.



against them that would be regarded as silly by later generations. It is amazing that the ambitious experiment of a man in Washington DC, coupled with enterprising Muslim camel-traders in the Levant, can influence the legislature of Nevada, thousands of miles away.

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