

## **Wagon Train to California**

*By Matthew Beard*

This is the story of a John Grigsby. Not the person known as Immigrant John Grigsby, not the person known as Soldier John Grigsby, and not the person known as Tennessee John Grigsby. This one is known as Captain John Grigsby, the son of George Grigsby and Rebecca James. This John was born on March 3, 1806 in Maryville, Blount County, Tennessee and died on March 15, 1876 in Moselle, Franklin County, Missouri. His life between those dates was filled with many adventures and he was one of the primary leaders in California to impact the revolution against Mexico and turning over that territory to finally become the 31st state of the United States of America on September 9, 1850.

This story will not be covering the Bear Flag Revolution or other adventures of this John Grigsby in California. For that, you need to attend the reunion in July 2008 in Napa Valley, California. This story will end with John and his family arriving in Mexico's California. Of course, there is a beginning... a beginning of a couple of families named Grigsby who lived in Tennessee.

As the development of Virginia used up the natural resources - the land and timber mainly - with the primary farms going to the eldest of each family, the younger children had to look to the west to be able to get their own land. This led to migration routes being developed into the states and territories such as Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana. Aaron and Phoebe (Harrison) Grigsby, along with their five children, seems to have moved to Tennessee sometime between the years of 1794 and 1806. 1794 was the year that their youngest child, Samuel Harrison Grigsby, was born in Rockbridge County, Virginia and 1806 was the year that their oldest son, George, had his first child in Blount County, Tennessee. This child was the John Grigsby that we are focusing on.

Sometime between 1833 and 1836, the Grigsby families started looking west again. It may have been that the good farm land just wasn't available for further family expansion in Tennessee. It also could have been that stories of open plains in the young state of Missouri drew the farmers further west. Whatever the reason, George and his youngest brother Samuel seem to have moved to Missouri during that time period. Samuel's son Terrell Lindsey Grigsby, the future winemaker of Napa Valley, was married in Laclede County, Missouri on March 11, 1838. John's fourth child, Mary Jane Grigsby, was born in Missouri on September 13, 1836. They may not have moved there together, but we do find both sets of families in Laclede County in 1838.

Was Missouri supposed to be just a jump-off point to go further to the west, as many people were doing, or was it intended to be a permanent residence. I believe it started out to be permanent, but the lure of the Oregon and California lands of richness had to have an impact.

According to the Oregon-California Trails Association ([www.octa-trails.org](http://www.octa-trails.org)), between the years of 1812 to 1848, there were 5,000 people who went to the Salt Lake area, 10,000 people went to Oregon, and 2,000 people went to California. Many of the people who went west, especially to the Salt Lake area, were followers of Brigham Young trying to escape persecution in the eastern states. While the Grigsby family is not believed to have been part of the Mormon faith, many on their wagon train were; including a person named William Ide.

Sometime before the spring of 1845, John Grigsby started to form a group of people to be part of a wagon train to the west. The intent was to follow the Oregon Trail all the way to Oregon where the federal government was handing out acreage in this new territory. The formation point of this wagon train was outside of Independence Missouri, better known as the Gateway to the West.

The main group of Oregon-bound wagons comprised of 223 wagons, 954 people, 545 firearms, 9,425 cattle, and 108 horses and mules according to the an online article by Stephenie Flora called Emigrants to Oregon in 1845, located at [www.oregonpioneers.com](http://www.oregonpioneers.com). In early May 1845, the wagons formed about three miles from the Kansas border at the Big Soldier Creek. However, one train company decided to travel "apart from the main company" and consisted of 38 wagons and about 1,000 head of cattle. This wagon train was led by John Henry Brown under the command of Captain John Grigsby. We may not ever know why they decided to travel apart from the main body, but it was likely due to the advice of John Brown or the guide Joe Meek.

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Included in the Grigsby wagon train, besides the aforementioned William Ide, was part of the Grigsby family currently living in Missouri. According to Ms. Flora's online article, we had the following Grigsby personnel involved:

Grigsby, Angeline (c.1830-): married Edgington, William  
Grigsby, Calily (c. 1833-): [\*2 male]  
Grigsby, Franklin F. (c. 1822-\_\_  
Grigsby, Grandville W. (c. 1829-)  
Grigsby, John (1806-1876)  
Grigsby, John N. (c. 1831-)  
Grigsby, Mary J. (c. 1835-)  
Grigsby, Nancy A. (c. 1841-)  
Grigsby, Sylvester (c. 1837-)  
Grigsby, Wiley (c. 1839-)

The John Grigsby (1806-1876) is obviously the John Grigsby that we are focusing on. Angeline Grigsby (identified in the NGFS database as Theresa Grigsby) is John's daughter who married William Edgington (or Edgington) on May 8, 1848 in California. However, William was not part of this wagon train, so must have come across in another one.

Calily Grigsby is John's son we have identified as Calvin Grigsby in the database based on the birth year. Mary Jane Grigsby was John's other daughter with Nancy Wilson (who had died in 1841). Sylvester Grigsby is John's son we have identified as Jefferson Sylvester Grigsby along with Wiley Grigsby who was John's youngest child with his first wife, Nancy. It is interesting to note that John's second wife, Mahala Shields, was not part of the wagon train, but their first child, Nancy A. Grigsby, was. This is probably due to her being pregnant with their second child, who was born on July 25, 1845 just a couple of months after the rest of the family had left on the trip. Since their third child, James, was born in Napa County, California in about 1847, Mahala and the second child, John, must have come over during the next year, but they were not on the list provided on the Oregon Pioneer website.

Grandville W. Grigsby was John and Nancy's oldest child, which means that all of John's children, alive at the time of the wagon train leaving, went with him on this trip of 4 to 5 months. The other Grigsby members I believe to be cousins of John Grigsby. Samuel Harrison Grigsby had a son named Achilles Fine Grigsby who settled in Napa, CA and I believe it to be the one shown above as Franklin F. Grigsby (c. 1822—). John N. Grigsby is Samuel's son John Melchesadeck Grigsby based on the birth year stated. Brothers Samuel and George, along with others of their families, probably came over between 1848 to 1855 based on marriage and birth years in the NGFS database.

To give an idea of the supplies that they had to pack on such a trip, the Oregon-California Trails Association ([www.octa-trails.org](http://www.octa-trails.org)) has this list on their website:

"Recommendations for an ideal wagon load varied from 1,600 to 2,500 pounds."

"Lansford Hastings, one of the earliest guidebook writers, advocated that each emigrant be supplied with 200 pounds of flour, 150 pounds of bacon, 10 pounds of coffee, 20 pounds of sugar, and 10 pounds of salt. The basic kitchenware was a cooking kettle, fry pan, coffee pot, tin plates, cups, knives, and forks."

"Charles Tuttle describes the daily menu of a typical emigrant: 'for breakfast, coffee, bacon, dry or pilot bread; for dinner, coffee, cold beans, bacon or buffalo meat; for supper, tea, boiled rice, and dried beef or codfish'.

Since timber was scarce or non-existent through western Nebraska and Wyoming, buffalo chips were utilized as a replacement fuel.

[Merrill Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, pp. 42,46, 48, 57.]

"The staples of the typical emigrant diet were bread, bacon and coffee. A number of travelers made a point of carrying along citric acid, vinegar, pickles, dried fruit and vegetables as antiscorbutics. Others prepared salads from wild fruits and vegetables along the way. Those who neglected to bring antiscorbutics and did not utilize the fresh vegetation might succumb to scurvy in the last third of the trip because of vitamin C deficiency."

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[Peter D. Olch, "Treading the Elephant's Tail: Medical Problems on the Overland Trails." *Overland Journal*, Volume 6, Number 1, 1988. Pp. 25-31.]

The trip would have started by crossing the creek and entering Kansas. The path would have been following U.S. Route 36 west to State Route 148, where they would have headed toward the north into Nebraska. By the time they reached Nebraska, they would have traveled about 290 miles. The trail would have continued on to what we know now as Interstate 80 where the wagon trains would have continued on in a northwesterly direction into Wyoming. By the time they reached Wyoming, they would have traveled almost 1,400 miles. In Wyoming, the wagon trains had to take a more northerly route through what is now the city of Casper and then along trails that are now State Routes 220 and 287. Before reaching Fort Bridger in Wyoming, they had to decide if they were taking a northern route into Idaho that was longer, but less likely to be attacked by natives, or take the southern route, which was shorter, but had persistent attacks and raids to endure. The Grigsby train took the southern route, again probably on the advice of their guides. By the time they left Wyoming, they had traveled almost 2,500 miles.



Idaho was a territory of change for the Grigsby train. For some reason, both Brown and Meek left the wagon train at Fort Hall and William Ide, who had been the chief herdsman, became a leader for the rest of the trip. Caleb Greenwood became the guide for the rest of the trip. By the time they arrived in California, the group had become known as the Grigsby-Ide Party (refer to <http://www.inn-california.com/Articles/biographic/idebio.html>).

Idaho also added another 500 miles to the trip for a total of almost 3,000 miles now. This would have been about 3 to 3 1/2 months of travel now. They would have entered Nevada somewhere northeast of the junction of State Route 93 and Interstate 80. They would have then followed the route where Interstate 80 is now and dropped south toward Carson City, where they would have entered California after adding another 1,100 miles to the trip and would have been on the Carson Route to what is now the Sacramento area. This would have been another 900 miles or so with the total trip being close to 5,000 miles due to the winding trail they had to follow. (information on the trails from the National Park Service site at [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)).

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Until they reached Fort Hall in Idaho, the plan had still been to travel to Oregon. It could have been this decision that made Brown and Meek give up the wagon train, but this is a guess. As mentioned before, William Ide was one of the members of the wagon train who was also of the Mormon faith. Quite a few members of the faith had already settled in California and it could have been his intention to go there all along. This settlement of the citizens of the USA was also one of the reasons that Mexico decided in 1846 (one year later) to start driving the interlopers out of their California. Sounds almost like what had happened in Texas only 10 years previously.

The Sacramento area was probably reached somewhere toward the end of October since a summary of one of the member's letters written years later has them arriving at Bear River in the Sierra Nevada mountains around October 15, 1845 ([www.paper-trail.org](http://www.paper-trail.org)). They would have started seeing snow in the upper mountains and passes and would have been trying to hurry to get out of the upper mountains onto lower ground before the heavy snows started arriving.

It is unclear where the designation of Captain John Grigsby first came into being. Did it occur when he was designated as the captain of the wagon train or did it first come into play when he was elected Captain during the Bear Flag Revolution? Could he have had previous military experience where he achieved this rank? We know that he died in Missouri in 1876 and that there was a Captain John Grigsby with Company I, 48th Missouri Infantry Regiment based on the "Organization Index to Pension Files of Veterans Who Served Between 1861 and 1900" ([www.footnote.com](http://www.footnote.com)—copy of records from the National Archives), Could this be the same person? This John Grigsby would have been 55 years old in 1861, so it is feasible. We'll have to get a copy of the military records to determine if this did occur.

The Grigsby family expanded in California and became a driving force for the wine industry, as well as other industries, in the Napa area during the middle to late 1800's. While not all of them stayed in California, there are many descendants of this branch of the Grigsby family still living in the state of California. As with other areas of the country, the Grigsby family was important to the formation of that state.