

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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An editorial column appeared in a Nevada newspaper in 1997 discussing unusual places and how they received their names. Lyon County was among them. Citing Helen Carlson's *Nevada Place Names* (1974), the column noted there was some confusion as to whether the county was named for General Nathaniel Lyon

or Captain Robert Lyon. In the ensuing years since the publication of *Nevada Place Names*, we have come to know how Lyon County received its name and who is responsible for all the confusion. Here, then, is the rest of the story!

Nobody was confused on November 25, 1861 when the Territorial Legislature, demonstrating its loyalty to the Union, named Lyon County in honor of fallen Civil War General Nathaniel Lyon. Lyon, a Connecticut native and West Point graduate, had recently died at the battle of Wilson's Creek, near Springfield, Missouri, on August 10, 1861. All the 19th century sources have the facts straight including Myron Angel's well-known *History of Nevada* (1881, p. 494). So when did the confusion begin?

We can start with Samuel Post Davis' *The History of Nevada* (1913). Davis, a long-time Carson City resident, former State Controller and State Publicity Agent, and one-time journalist and editor with the *Carson City Appeal* fancied himself an historian. In his state history, Davis published an article by Major G.W. Ingalls on "Indians of Nevada" that claimed, among other things, that Lyon County was named "after Captain Robert Lyon of the pioneer army". The early Great Basin pioneer survived the Pyramid Lake Indian War of 1860 and later served as Douglas County Assessor and Recorder. For Ingalls, logic seemingly dictated that Lyon County was named for Robert Lyon, a Pyramid Lake "war-hero", because the 1861 Territorial Legislature had named Ormsby and Storey counties for fallen comrades, William Ormsby and Edward Storey. So it appears G.W. Ingalls, appointed by President U.S. Grant as Indian Agent for Nevada in 1872, and years later returning to Nevada to serve as the director of the Nevada Chamber of Commerce in Reno, authored the confusion.

We can also blame Ingalls for making the erroneous statement that Reno, in 1868, was named for General Marcus Reno of Little Big Horn fame. The Battle of the Little Big Horn in Montana Territory, more commonly known as "Custer's Last Stand", was fought in June 1876. Reno, in fact, was named for Jesse Lee Reno, another West Point graduate and fallen Union general dying in 1862. However that is another story!

Other writers would follow to compound the problem of how Lyon County got its name. Dr. Effie Mona Mack, a prominent educator and head of the social studies department at Reno High School; and Byrd Wall Sawyer of Fallon, a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and the step-mother of future governor Grant Sawyer, collaborated on a Nevada history text, *Our State; Nevada*, for the public schools. Published in 1940, we find that "Lyon County (was) named for a hero of the Indian wars..." A subsequent book co-authored by the two educators, *Here is Nevada* (1965), perpetuated the error twenty-five years later. At least two generations of Nevada students grew up believing that someone other than Nathaniel Lyon was Lyon County's namesake. Not surprisingly, Sam Davis' *History of Nevada* is included on the "Reading List".

Until recently, Lyon County residents were still confused about the origin of the county's name. But all that has changed now with State Library and Archives staff working with the Mason Valley News and the *Fernley Leader-Dayton Courier* in their production of *Lyon County Reflections: A Look At Our Historic Past*. In 1991, a territorial seal for Lyon County was found among the holdings of the State Archives and, lo and behold, after comparing a likeness of General Lyon with the image on the county seal we found it to be one and the same person.

And now, hopefully, all will come to know who's Lyon now! In fact, the Iowa, Kansas, and Minnesota legislatures also named counties in honor of General Nathaniel Lyon.

Photo: Sheet music honoring Nathaniel Lyon, killed in battle in Missouri in 1861.

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*Battle Mountain Bugle*

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, and

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