

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist



Who was Reno, Nevada, named after? And for that matter, Reno, Pennsylvania; Fort Reno, Wyoming; Reno County, Kansas; and El Reno, Oklahoma?

Those who don't know generally say Major Marcus Albert Reno, the officer who, until his exoneration in recent years, bore the blame for the defeat of Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer's troops at the Little Big Horn in June 1876.

But, there was another Reno--Union General Jesse Lee Reno who was shot off his horse and killed on September 14, 1862 at the battle of Fox's Gap, South Mountain, Maryland, during the Civil War. Charles Crocker, the railroad construction superintendent for the Central Pacific Railroad, and his partners at the behest of General Irvin McDowell, officially named the new town at Lake's Crossing on the Truckee River for *Jesse Reno*, not *Marcus Reno*. The public first learned of the naming in the April 23, 1868 issue of the Auburn, California, *Stars and Stripes*

:

The name of the new town on the C.P.R.R. at the junction of the contemplated branch road to Virginia City in Nevada, is Reno, in honor of General Reno, who fell gloriously fighting in defense [sic] of the flag against the assault of traitors in rebellion

Predating the founding of Reno, Nevada, the Kansas state legislature created Reno County, near Wichita, on February 26, 1867 to honor the fallen war hero who had also served in the Mexican War. Fort Reno, in the Wyoming country of Dakota Territory, was named for Jesse Reno in 1865. It burned in 1868. Reno, Pennsylvania, clearly was named for Jesse Reno, who lived in nearby Franklin, Venango County, during the 1830s with his family. The new town of Reno was named in his honor in 1865. El Reno, founded in 1889 in central Oklahoma, was named after nearby Fort Reno, and yes, you guessed it, Ft. Reno was named after Union General Jesse Reno in 1874.

So why all the confusion? Because people generally remember Marcus Reno for the controversial Little Big Horn campaign, and few persons know today there was an army general by the name of Jesse Reno who died in the Civil War.

We can lay some of the blame for the erroneous connection in Nevada on the doorstep of Sam Davis' *History of Nevada* (1913). Editor W.W. Booth of the *Tonopah Daily Bonanza* wrote in 1914 that the two-volume chronicle was "not a correct or true history of Nevada." An article published in the state history by Major G. W. Ingalls, a former military officer and director of the Nevada Chamber of Commerce, claimed that Reno was named for Marcus Reno, although the founding of the railroad town was eight years before the battle of the Little Big Horn in Montana Territory.

Marcus Reno prior to "Custer's Last Stand" in 1876 was just another commissioned officer. Major Ingalls had a rich and varied career; however, he was no historian and failed to properly identify Reno's namesake just 45 years after the town began.

A comprehensive article on how the community of Reno acquired its name appeared in the fall 1984 issue of the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*. In addition, Reno resident Colonel Bill McConnell authored a biography of Major General Jesse Lee Reno (1996) and has done much to set the record straight.

An impressive statue of General Reno was dedicated on Memorial Day, May 29, 2006 at Powning Park - one hundred and thirty-eight years after the town was named.

See: *Remember Reno: A Biography of Major General Jesse Lee Reno* by William F. McConnell (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 1996)

Photo: Nevada Historical Society

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, June 1998 edition. Reprinted August 2007.)