MEMOIR OF CAPT. MARTIN SCOTT

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By J. Fletcher Williams, Secretary and Librarian

Among the many noted and remarkable persons who have been prominently connected with Northwestern history, Capt. Martin Scott was one of the most singular. Materials from which to frame a biography of him are very meager, and what few I have, are drawn from a variety of sources, but are, I believe, reliable.

Martin Scott was born in Bennington, Vt., Jan. 17, 1788. His family were humble people, and his advantages of education in early life exceedingly limited. He was noted, even in his boyhood, for his daring and courage, and fondness for field sports – a passion that clung to him even in old age.

When the war of 1812 broke out, young Scott promptly enlisted in what was afterwards known as the famous “Green Mountain Boys.” He served with credit, and by a commission dated April 21, 1814, was promoted as a second lieutenant in the Twenty-Sixth Infantry, and in May following, advanced to the rank of first lieutenant. During the war he served with conspicuous gallantry and distinction, and attracted the attention of many of his superior officers, and though mustered out of the service when the army was reduced at the close of the war in 1815, the reputation he had gained procured for him subsequently an appointment in the regular army. His commission, which conferred on him a second lieutenancy in the Rifles, was dated April 1818, and the subsequent year he was promoted to a first lieutenancy.

In May, 1821, he was transferred, with the same rank, to the Fifth Infantry, in which he served, with various promotions, until his death, a period of twenty-six year.

Capt. Scott having been appointed from civilian life, and being somewhat unpolished in his manners, and uneducated, was looked on with much coldness by his brother officers when he entered the Rifles, they being mostly of aristocratic families, and graduates of West Point. His habits, too, were very economical, a result, in part, of the poverty of his early life. All these things caused Scott to be intensely disliked, and no opportunity was lost to snub him and treat him with contempt and indignity. Finally, with two or three exceptions, they refused all intercourse with him, hoping to drive him to resign. These persecutions and annoyances were carried to the farthest extreme that they dared, as no one was willing to give Scott the insult direct, which would have justified him in challenging them, as he was known to be one of the most courageous men and “dead shots” in the army.

The surgeon of the regiment, Dr. John Gale, was one of the officers who was still on good terms with Scott, and of him Scott asked advice as to how he should act in the case. Dr. Gale told him there were only two alternatives. One was to resign and be driven from the service, or to challenge the first one who gave him an insult direct. Scott resolved on the latter course.

As intimated above, none of the officers wished to “bell the cat,” although each hoped some other one would call Scott out, and give him a quietus. At least one of the officers persuaded a relative of his, named Keith, a dissipated adventurer who held a

lieutenant's commission in the Rifles, though stationed at another post, to bear the brunt of their spite, and take the chance of a duel with Scott. Keith was a Virginian by birth, and a practical duelist, and was at the time, half dead with consumption. Pleased at the prospect, no doubt, of another encounter to add to his list of "affairs of honor," (for he had already killed several antagonists), Keith readily consented to fight Scott, saying, in his reckless, dare-devil way, "he expected to die soon anyhow, and it didn't make any difference if Scott killed him," – but in point of fact, he hoped to kill Scott, as he was a splendid shot. Keith took an early opportunity to insult Scott in the presence of the mess, so pointedly that there could be only one reply, ant that Scott soon sent him in the shape of a challenge. The only officer in the regiment who would consent to act as Scott's second, was a young man who had conceived a liking for him, and not joined in the conspiracy against him. Dr. Gale also acted as his confidant and friend.

Keith and his abettors, knowing Scott's deadly aim and cool, steady nerves, endeavored to render both unsteady by a cowardly artifice. The spot chosen for the duel was a ravine near the post. Thither they secretly sent a detachment of men the night previous, and dug a grave on the spot where the duelists were to stand. Shortly after sunrise the principals, with their seconds and other officers, repaired to the field. Arriving there, while the seconds were "tossing" for position, Keith remarked in a tone intentionally loud enough to be heard by Scott – "I will shoot the d--- Yankee through the guts." Scott had really intended before the encounter, to fire in the air, and not at his antagonist, but on hearing this remark, he became assured that it was a plot to kill him, and made up his mind accordingly. He merely remarked to his attendant – "I shall shoot him through the first button of the coat." His pistol was handed him, and Scott, to see if his aim had been affected by the artifices used, drew a bead on some object, and found his nerves as steady as steel. "I knew I had him then," he remarked, in giving account of the affair to my informant (Gen Sibley.) Time was called. The word was given, and both pistols rang out sharply on the morning air at the same instant. Keith staggered and fell, the blood pouring from his mouth and nose, and from a *bullet hole close by the first button on his coat!* His friends advanced and picked him up, while to their great chagrin, Scott walked away apparently unhurt.

But he did not escape entirely unhurt. The aim of Keith was true. He had shot Scott through the bowels, as he promised, though fortunately the wound was not necessarily fatal. The ball passed through the body without much injury to any vital part, but struck the edge of the spine, splitting off a small piece. The agony of the wound, he said, was excruciating, but sustained by his intense pride and strong will, Scott managed to walk away with firm step, and without exhibiting any marks of suffering His nerves sustained him until he reached his room, when he fell fainting on the floor. Dr. Gale found him here a few minutes later, and had him carefully attended to. His escape from death was narrow. Had the ball struck the spine fairly, it would have produced death. As it was, Scott was confined to his bed for many days, but his iron constitution and fine health brought him out soon without any impairment of either.

Keith was at first thought to be mortally wounded, but strange to say, the wound prolonged his life. It produced a counter-irritation that relieved his diseased lungs, and he is said to have lived for several years, when otherwise he must necessarily have died in a few months.

This event put an end to the persecution of Scott. He had forced their respect, at least, by his coolness and bravery. At the next mess table, which he was able to attend, he mentioned so as to be heard by all that henceforth any insulting act or words would be noticed by him, and the author promptly called to the field, but no one dared to commit any overt act of that character. He was soon after transferred, as mentioned before, to the Fifth Infantry, a change no doubt agreeable to him.

Scott came to Fort Snelling with his company (G, Fifth Infantry) about 1821 – the exact date I do not now find, and was stationed at that post most of the time until about the year 1840, or perhaps later. He served on special duty in all parts of the Northwest, from Pembina to Fort Dearborn, (Chicago,) and from Lake Michigan to the Missouri River, and was widely known among the early settlers of what is now Wisconsin and Minnesota, thirty years ago. Many amusing stories are related to his peculiarities.

Scott's sole passion seemed to be field sports. He always kept one or more fine horses, a pack of hunting dogs, several guns, and a Negro servant to take charge of the animals. His hunting ground ranged from Prairie du Chien to Fort Snelling, and he must have been familiar with every portion of it. According to the accounts I have heard of his prowess, whole hecatombs of bear, deer, elk, buffalo, wolves, and other animals, must have fallen by his hand. A stream in Wisconsin, called "Bloody Run" is said to have been so named, because a favorite hunting place of Capt. Scott, and on account of the quantities of game he had slaughtered along its banks.

All accounts concerning his marksmanship so agree, that there can be no doubt his skill in that line was marvelous. One of his common pistol feats, was taking two potatoes, throwing them into the air successively, and watching until they came "in range," putting a bullet through both. He used to place an apple on the head of his Negro servant, and with his rifle or pistol, send a ball through it. With a shotgun, he was an unerring marksman, and the bird that rose near him was sure to be brought down. While at Fort Snelling, he had at one time, 20 or 25 dogs, and mounted on his splendid black horse, used to delight in scouring the prairies and valleys after wolves and foxes. Gen. Sibley often accompanied him in these chases, and as the latter had a good kennel also, of various breeds, the yelp of the combined packs when in full cry after a quarry, must have awakened the echoes of the bluffs in a way never equaled since. And it took a brave bold rider to follow Capt. Scott. No obstacle seemed to daunt him, and his famous black steed partook of his spirit in that respect.

His marksmanship, and prowess as a hunter, became at one time of almost national fame, and many have almost classed him along with Daniel Boone, or Davy Crockett, or looked on him as a mythical character. Who has not heard the famous "coon story" concerning him? It has given rise to a national slang expression – "to come down like Capt. Scott's coon," being familiar to every one. The story first originated in a political paper in New York (Utica, I believe) during an excited campaign, possibly in 1840. The editor spoke of some opponent "coming down, or surrendering, like Capt. Scott's coon." On being asked the meaning of the expression, he explained it somewhat as follows: Capt. Scott and several friends were out hunting, and got separated. As they passed along, one of them spied a coon sitting on the top limb of a high tree, and took a shot at him, but without effect. He passed on, and soon the next repeated the effort, with like result; and then another and another, until all had failed. After a while Capt. Scott came up, and seeing the coon, drew a bead on it, and was about to fire, when the conn called

out, “Who is that?” The Capt. Replied, “My name is Scott.” “Scott? What Scott?” “Capt. Martin Scott,” was the reply. “Are you Capt. Martin Scott?” retorted the coon. “Then hold on – don’t shoot; I may as well come down.” Of course this made great amusement. It was widely copied by the press, and soon Capt. Scott’s coon became a national byword.

Keating, in his interesting work on “Maj. Long’s expedition to the sources of the St. Peter’s river, in 1823,” relates a very characteristic incident of Capt. Scott. The expedition had orders to proceed to Fort Snelling, (or ”Fort St. Anthony”,” as it was called then,) where Col. Snelling, of the 5th Infantry, was to furnish it with an escort to proceed to Pembina, via Big Stone Lake. Capt. Scott was designated by the Secretary of War to command the military escort. Col. Snelling, however, was secretly hostile to Capt. Scott, and resolved to deprive him of this honor. When the expedition reached Fort St. Anthony, Col. S. pretended that he could not spare enough men from his command just then, but would send Captain Scott to Prairie du Chien for the necessary force, and on his return the escort would be provided. Scott consequently started for Prairie du Chien with Mackinac boats, and having very favorable winds on the return voyage, made the trip in an unprecedented short space of time. But what was his astonishment to find, on his arrival at the Fort, that the expedition had set out immediately after his departure, in command of Capt. Denny, another officer, and were now far on their way. Scott was furious at this treatment, but resolved to disappoint the evident object of it. He demanded from the commanding officer the right, which he had under the orders of the War Department, to follow and overtake the expedition. This could not be refused him, but he was allowed an escort of only four men, and to carry supplies, one old, worn-out packhorse, incapable of a day’s work. But, nothing daunted, he set out with this equipment. As he had anticipated, the horse broke down the first day, and was abandoned, the men packing their provisions on their backs. In this manner they advanced as rapidly as possible, for several days, until their provisions gave out. Scott carried his unerring rifle, but no game could be found – not even birds. Finally their shoes wore out, and the men were almost barefooted. Scott now saw his chance of overtaking the main party was small. He therefore ordered the soldiers to make the best of their way back to the fort, and he pushed on alone. For two entire days he was without a morsel of food, but his iron constitution kept him up, and he made forced marches every day. Finally he overtook the party, to their great surprise, on the Bois des Sioux River, and commanded it during the rest of the expedition.

Scott was free from many vices which army officers at that period were addicted to. He had never played a game of cards, or drank a glass of liquor, or used tobacco in his life. As before remarked, his habits were very economical. As he was unmarried until quite late in life, and apparently had no object for saving his money, this was taken by his brother officers for mere meanness, and excited more or less prejudice against him. He was always very reserved about his own affairs, or his family, and it was not until after his death that it was known that Scott had during his army life contributed considerable of his pay to supporting or aiding several of his relatives who were in need of such assistance. On one occasion, after he had served in the West for a number of years, he resolved to pay a visit to his old home. He had left there a poor farmer’s boy, and wished to return in such a way that no one would recognize him. He drove a magnificent white horse in a gig, and his Negro servant, dressed in livery, rode his black

thoroughbred. And what made his equipage more singular; his pack of about 20-blooded dogs accompanied him. He drove in this style through the streets of Bennington, and halted at the inn, the center of a crowd of wandering citizens, not one of whom recognized him however. He took a seat by the window, and shortly after, he saw his brother passing with a yoke of oxen. He at once went out and hailed him with "You have a fine yoke of oxen there, my friend; do they belong to you, sir?" "No," replied the brother, who did not recognize him, "I wish they did – but I am not able to purchase them. They belong to one of my neighbors." Scott inquired what they could be had for, and on learning the sum, handed him the amount, saying he would make him a present of the oxen. This unexpected and extraordinary liberality from a perfect stranger, quite overcame the brother, who mechanically took the money and stammered out his thanks, wondering if it was not all a dream.

Capt. Scott then questioned him further, concerning his means, etc. He said he lived on a small farm near by, which he rented, and had much difficulty in making a living for his family. Capt. Scott asked what sum the owner would probably ask for the farm. On being informed, the said that he would like to make him a present of that, too. His brother, who had been attentively gazing at him during the parley, now recognized him, and the greeting between the two brothers was such as might be expected. They literally "fell upon each other's necks and wept," and went home together with hearts overflowing with happiness.

But I must bring this sketch to a close. Capt. Scott as is well known, fell during the Mexican war. He had been promoted from the Lieutenancy he held when he entered the Fifth Infantry, to the rank of Captain in 1828, and Major in 1846, for gallant conduct at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma. He commanded his regiment at Monterey, and was brevetted Lieut. Col. for gallant and meritorious conduct in the severe conflicts at that place. On Sept. 8, 1847, while bravely leading his regiment at Molina del Rey, a bullet pierced his breast. Feeling the wound mortal, he took his watch and pocketbook, and handing them to one of the officers, said give these to my wife," and expired. A brother officer, Gen. R. B. Marcy, U. S. A., has written concerning him – "He was a pleasant companion, an honorable man, and a gallant soldier. I most sincerely respect his memory, and with all my heart say, Peace to his ashes."

Note: Col. Scott's remains were subsequently removed to Bennington, and a neat monument erected over them.