

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

CALEB LYON OF LYONSDALE

Number 374

July 13, 1966

Idaho's second territorial governor was an up-state New York politician and was "one of the oddest figures in Idaho's history," according to a contemporary observer. Under President Polk in the 1840's, Lyon had been awarded the post of Consul to Shanghai. But the California gold rush saved Lyon from Chinese diplomacy--or vice versa. Instead of taking the appointment, Lyon headed for San Francisco. His legal training and silky tongue won him a position as assistant secretary to the California Constitutional Convention. Later, after gold fever and western politics temporarily lost their charm, he went back to New York, captured seats in both houses of the state Legislature, then campaigned on an Independent ticket in 1852 and won a berth in the United States House of Representatives. That was his crowning achievement--the rest was denouement. He failed re-election, then dropped from the political limelight for several years. When the Civil War opened, Lyon found himself in a minor military position in Washington. One of his duties--no doubt self-appointed was to confiscate the contents of the Robert E. Lee mansion in Arlington for the Smithsonian Institution. Rumor reported that the New Yorker helped himself to some of the more outstanding objects d'art he found there for his own library. In the meantime, Lyon continued to hunt for more lucrative offices, and was in Washington when the Idaho position became available.

References:

William Arba Ellis, ed., Norwich University, 1819-1911: Her History, Her Graduates, Her Roll of Honor, II (Montpelier, Vermont: The Capital City Press, 1911), p. 327 Biographical Director of Congress (Washington, 1949), p. 1486; Thomas Donaldson, Idaho of Yesterday (Caldwell, 1941), p. 232; Boise News, August 13, 1864, p. 1, c. 5.

Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428