Among the thousands who went west after the Civil War to seek their fortunes were two brothers, Davis Willson (far left, 1872) and his older brother, Lester Sebastian Willson (left circa early 1867). New Yorkers by birth, Davis and Lester settled in Bozeman, Montana, depicted above in an 1872 drawing. When the Willsons arrived in 1866 and 1867, respectively, Bozeman, a struggling ramshackle community, served both as destination for Bozeman Trail emigrants and jump-off point for those heading on to Montana's gold mines.

All photographs courtesy Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Libraries, Bozeman, unless otherwise noted
Montana

On the afternoon of October 22, 1901, a distinguished, elderly gentleman nervously prepared to address a small group of people gathered at his home in Bozeman, Montana. General Lester Sebastian Willson, one of the town's earliest settlers and most prosperous merchants, smiled apologetically as he clumsily began his speech to the Contemporary Club. "I was asked to talk to this club," he said haltingly. "I don't remember on what subject exactly; either on 'Coming to Montana,' or something relative to pioneer days. I haven't arranged anything and don't know where to commence."

Fumbling with a pile of documents on the table before him, Willson picked up a tattered ledger and continued: "I discovered an old day-book the other day—it dates back to 1868—that might help me out, but as some of my customers of that time are present, I don't know whether I had better tell or not." Once the polite chuckles had receded, Willson warmed to his subject. He recalled his arrival in Bozeman thirty-four years earlier, the growth of his business, and his trip back to New York to get his bride. Curiously, Lester omitted mention of his younger brother, Davis. Davis Willson had arrived in Bozeman nearly a year before Lester, and though both brothers remained in Montana for many years, Davis's accomplishments have remained obscured by his older brother's prominence.

The story of the Willson brothers and their role in Bozeman's settlement is perhaps typical of other Montana frontier towns. Enterprising entrepreneurs, armed with capital and determination, arrived early in the formation of most Treasure State hamlets and, like their respective communities, either prospered or perished. Little is known about many of these entrepreneurs. With Lester and Davis Willson, however, it is possible to flesh out the story. Their experiences, from quite different viewpoints, tell of emigration to Montana over the Bozeman Trail, of early settlers' responses to Indian conflicts, especially Red Cloud's War in 1867, of early territorial political rivalries, and of the influence of the Civil War and Reconstruction on politics and town development in early Montana. As brothers, Lester and Davis shared little in common, either in personality or in their initial impressions of Montana. Like Lester on that October afternoon in 1901, we can rummage through the Willson diaries, letters, and ledger books to discover ambivalent reactions to a new territory.

Lester, the older of the two Willson brothers and the oldest of seven children, was born on June 16, 1839, to Ambrose and Julia Hill Willson of Canton, New York. He apparently received a good education at the Canton Academy before entering the working world as a clerk in his uncle's store. When the Civil War broke out, Lester was twenty-two and a shopkeeper. Answering the recruiting call of the Sixtieth New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, he joined Company A on August 29, 1861, at Canton. He followed the other recruits to Camp Wheeler at Ogden'sburg, New York, where, on September 11, he received his first promotion to second sergeant of the unit.

During the war, Lester received recognition as a meticulous record


2. Ibid. Lester remained better known than Davis to Bozeman residents long after his death. In December 1950, for example, Bozeman resident William J. Sullivan purchased an antique desk and while examining it discovered a secret compart-
make the difficult transition to civilian life. Like returning veterans throughout history, he experienced an intense restlessness when reunited with his family, an alienation that found expression in both physical and emotional discomfort. Years later he recalled that he passed his first night at home in Canton in a fitful sleep. “I would have rested better on the floor of the barn with a simple blanket,” he observed, rather than the feather bed in his old room. Consorting with other veterans in town brought no relief from his sense of estrangement, and when a letter came a week later from New York City offering him a new position, he jumped at a chance to escape his discontent.5

General Edwin Atkins
Merritt was married to the sister of Lester’s cousin, Charles V. Rich. Merritt, who had been appointed quartermaster general in the New York State Militia, offered Rich and Willson commissions in his office. New York City provided employment, but Lester found desk work tedious and his office almost as stifling as his parents’ home. Frequent trips to Albany, the capital, provided relief, and he enjoyed staying on deck during the lengthy night trips by steamboat along the Hudson. He could, he said, “stow away enough ozone to last until the next trip.” Lester found a job in the office for an old army comrade, Loren W. Tuller, and the two men worked diligently through 1865 to help dismantle the state’s huge war machine by settling property accounts, paying contractors, and issuing rations to indigent veterans.6

Despite the work, Lester’s restlessness continued. Late in December 1865, he heard Schuyler Colfax, then speaker of the United States House of Representatives, give a talk on his travels in the western states at the Cooper Institute. Lester’s cousin, Charles Rich, and Loren Tuller had also attended Colfax’s speech, and afterward, the three men returned to the office to discuss what they had heard. Growing impatient with the talk, Lester looked at his companions earnestly and said: “Boys, let’s go to Montana!” Charles Rich countered: “You dare not shake on it.” Challenged, Willson rose and walked to the center of the room with his hand outstretched. Tuller and Rich did likewise. Sealing their bargain with a handshake, they resolved to go to Montana as soon as possible and start a mercantile business.7

As much as he wanted to leave immediately, Lester Willson could not resign his commission until his office work wound down. There were other accounts to settle, and added to his responsibilities was the administration of the Albany Soldier’s Home for indigent and convalescing veterans. But Lester had some capital to invest and a human resource to contribute to the enterprise: his brother, Davis.

Somewhat of a wanderlust, Davis Willson was a deeply spiritual man given to philosophical musings and moral pronouncements. Born in 1841 in Canton, New York, he was not blessed with the robust health of his older brother. Early on, Davis learned

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6. Ibid.


the printer’s trade in St. Lawrence County, then traveled to California in 1859 partly to see if a change in climate would improve his constitution. He returned to New York at the outbreak of the war to enter the Canton Academy and in fall 1863 transferred to the preparatory school at Oberlin College. The following summer he left his studies to assume a position Lester won for him as a civilian clerk for General Merritt. After the war, Davis returned to Canton to resume work as a store clerk, but when Lester proposed the Montana scheme, he agreed to it eagerly.

Rich and Tuller made preparations for their trip through spring 1866, while Lester continued at his post in New York City, handling more than 5,000 war claims valued in excess of $475,000. By May the partners were ready for their expedition to Montana Territory. Indeed, on May 7, 1866, Davis Willson and friend Charles Caldwell boarded the train at Canton. Traveling by rail through western New York and Michigan, they rendezvoused with the rest of the party in Chicago on May 9.

Charles Rich and his nephew Frank Rich, Loren Tuller, Perry Earl, Hank Jones, and Frank Harper all occupied themselves with sightseeing before pushing on to St. Joseph, Missouri, the next day. There they boarded a steamboat for Omaha.

Aboard the steamboat, Oscar Penwell, a rancher from Montana Territory’s Gallatin Valley, befriended the group. Providing glowing accounts of the opportunities near his home, Penwell convinced the men to establish a store on his holdings. They might not have been wholly prepared, however, for what they would encounter. When they witnessed two weather-beaten French trappers offer several slabs of dirty, smoke-cured bacon to the ship’s captain for passage, Frank Rich asked: “What do they do with that stuff?” “Eat it,” replied the steamboat captain. “Not me,” declared Rich. “If you go to Montana,” the captain observed dryly, “you’ll eat it.”

Arriving in Omaha on May 14, they paused for two weeks to prepare for their trip. Including final purchases, Tuller and Rich invested more than $5,400 in transportation, store merchandise, mules, wagons, and two large wall tents. On May 31, the men set out for Montana along the Platte River road. It would be an eventful summer. Colonel Henry B. Carrington had just left Fort Kearny on an expedition up the Bozeman Trail to establish forts to protect travelers. The Bozeman wound through Indian lands, and government officials needed to secure Indian permission for immigrant travel. Even as Carrington left Fort Kearny, Indian representatives, including the Oglala chief Red Cloud, were converging on Fort Laramie to discuss the matter. By the time the Tuller and Rich party reached the north bank of the Platte River opposite Fort Kearny, Carrington had reached Fort Laramie. Seeing the troops, and the government’s intentions to open the road with or without Indian approval, Red Cloud and his faction had left the council in disgust, vowing violent resistance to immigration along the Bozeman road.

Oblivious to these events, Davis Willson recorded his party’s progress on the trail with daily entries in a pocket diary, lacing his sometimes humorous description of the countryside and fellow travelers with philosophical musings. Hardly alone, they were part of a constant ribbon of vehicles that encountered one another many times along the trail as some parties would stop, allowing others to pass on, and then catch up as those travelers ahead would pause. One person who impressed Davis particularly was a whiskey trader named “Barton.” Nicknaming the man “Blowhard,” Davis said he is a big, fat, greasy man whom we ran into the other day and is going to Montana with a load of alcohol. He rides a horse and ‘his man’ as he calls him (another fat, greasy fellow) drives his ox team. He makes himself rather familiar, is a regular ignoramus, but thinks he is a man of more than ordinary capacity.

An early encounter with such an unsavory type left Davis somewhat soured, but nothing seems to have shaken his commitment to the enterprise more than the behavior of his companion Charlie Caldwell. When the party reached Fort Kearny, Caldwell and Tuller crossed the Platte River to the fort to deliver and pick up mail. At the sutler’s post, Caldwell became roaring drunk and nearly drowned while attempting to recross the river. So shocked was Davis that he refused to describe it in his diary, stating only his conviction that his enjoyment of the trip was “completely marred for the remainder of the journey and perhaps for a long, long period beyond.”


12. D. Willson Diary, June 5, 1866.

Davis saw a moral lesson in every happenstance and punished himself for his own perceived failures. Once the party traveled beyond Fort Laramie and moved into the territory Red Cloud had vowed to defend, Davis learned to his horror that Barton, the whiskey trader, had been killed and mutilated by a war party a few miles ahead. The thought of the “fat, greasy man” being pierced with twenty arrows shamed Davis for his earlier description. “He was a good man and we wronged him in giving him the name that we did,” Davis wrote.

Many men deserved that name where he has not in the least. It was his free, easy and open manner and his familiarity of conversing of his own affairs and enquiring into others which is so characteristic of all western people, and which we at the time did not understand, that led us to speak of him in the terms that we did.14

Through the rest of August the men struggled up the Bozeman Trail toward Montana, occasionally sighting war parties or the graves of unfortunate travelers who had encountered them. The hardships began to tell. Davis’s feet became so blistered from his boots that by the time the party reached Bozeman Pass on September 1, he was in his stocking feet. Ecstatic over reaching the Gallatin Valley, their goal, the men cheered and tossed their hats, a performance they repeated each time they passed a cabin, fence, or cultivated field that morning. They camped that evening about three miles from Bozeman and the next morning entered the town itself, parking their wagons by a small potato patch cultivated by William H. Tracy, one of the original settlers who had helped locate the townsite in 1864. Starved for fresh vegetables, Davis and his companions ate the tubers raw, declaring that “apples never tasted so fine.”15

Tuller and Rich soon discovered that they owned a humble but scarce and highly sought commodity. After moving on to Oscar Penwell’s ranch where they set up business in a wall tent, the new merchants found the local settlers starved for cornmeal, a staple impossible to produce in the Gallatin Valley. During their journey, they had purchased several sacks of corn as mule feed. As enterprising shopkeepers, they launched their business with a flourish by grinding the supply into meal and selling it for thirty-five cents a pound.16

After selling goods out of the tent at Penwell’s ranch for two months, Tuller and Rich moved into Bozeman, where they rented the bottom floor of a cabin owned by the local Masonic lodge, the largest log structure in the tiny settlement. They attached a corral to the building, which Davis Willson operated as the “Empire,” and began freighting flour to Virginia City for miller Thomas Cover. They proudly posed in front of their establishment that winter for what may have been the town’s first outdoor photograph.17

While Davis established himself in Montana, Lester worked through his assistant quartermaster general assignments in New York. In November, he transferred to Albany where he assumed duties as full-time superintendent for the state soldier’s home. With a bountiful salary and an opportunity to mingle with New York’s leading politicians, Lester likely remained unconcerned when mail from his brother and partners ceased that winter. Writing to him shortly before Christmas, his mother worried about the silence from Bozeman. Lester responded: “I presume it is a worse task for him to learn not to write than it is for you to go without his letters,” adding, “Take my word for it; that he is all right and doing more for his future welfare and prosperity than ever before.”18

While superintendent of the state soldier’s home in Albany, Lester met a number of female staff members and volunteers among whom were Mary A. Cory and her friend, Emma D. Weeks. A musician and singer of unusual talent, Emma made frequent visits to the home to perform for the residents, and Lester soon found her captivating. They would correspond and maintain association until their marriage in 1869. Throughout winter 1866–1867, Lester courted the singer and lobbied the legislature for continued funding of the home. Among his important political contacts in Albany was Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, ardent supporter of the soldier’s home, and famous publicist for westward expansion. Once, when Greeley visited Albany for a meeting, Lester escorted the editor to the home for dinner. “On our way out in a carriage I told him

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17. Date for photograph of Tuller and Rich’s store may have been 1868. On November 28, 1866, the partners paid H. H. Coleman for painting a sign for their store, William White Alderson, an early Bozeman settler who kept a diary, noted a photographer was in town on March 19, 1868. See William Alderson Diary, 1864–1879, Collection 703, MSU Libraries (hereafter Alderson Diary).
18. Lester S. Willson to Julia Hill Willson, December 26, 1866, L. Willson Papers.
20. Ibid.
In partnership with several others, Davis and Lester Willson established themselves as merchants. Above, their store is shown in what may be the earliest surviving image of Bozeman, Montana, taken sometime in 1866. The sign reads “Tuller and Rich Cheap Cash Store.” Although none of the men on the porch are identified, they likely include partners Loren Tuller, Charles Rich, and Davis Willson. Through the years, the Willson Company moved to a number of locations as indicated in the illustration at right from a 1927 Bozeman Courier advertisement.

I was going out to Montana soon,” Willson recalled years later.

He was engrossed in thoughts of the meeting he had just left, I suppose, and did not say anything for a time. Finally he broke out, “What are you going to Montana for?” My answer was a general one. I had to make my own way in life; this position was leading me into politics for which I was not fitted, and disliked, etc. “That’s right,” he said, “Keep out of politics. Go up to your father’s farm and go to work.” I demurred and the subject was dropped.10

While Lester romanced and politicked—“living in velvet,” as he would later term it, his partners struggled through their first Montana winter and discovered some disconcerting realities about conducting business on the frontier.10 Red Cloud’s War all but halted commerce along the Bozeman Trail, and the only routes by which goods could reach the isolated territory were up the Missouri River to Fort Benton by steamboat and then overland to Helena, or up the trail from Utah to Virginia City. Winter closed even these limited supply lines, and Montana wholesalers had learned that profits were to be gained by “cornering” essential supplies before snow settled in for the season. Although Tuller and Rich found they could haul flour from Thomas Cover’s mill to help finance their trips to Helena and Virginia City, the outrageous prices they paid to replenish their stock at the two towns taught them the necessity of planning to lay in essential supplies for sale over winter. While Davis helped move freight between Bozeman and other towns, he busied himself in the social life of the Gallatin Valley, taught school for the settlement’s few children, prepared himself for Masonic lodge membership, and made arrangements to act as regular correspondent for the Montana Post.
Even as Davis went about his civic involvement, events on the Bozeman Trail brought apprehension. The annihilations of Captain William Fetterman’s command near Fort Phil Kearny on December 18, 1866, heightened settler anxiety, as did fears that Indians would strike again the following spring. When such fears reached fever pitch in March 1867, John Bozeman made an impassioned appeal to Acting Governor Thomas Francis Meagher for help lest the townspeople need to be evacuated.21 Of the War Department in Washington Meagher requested authorization to call out a territorial militia, and his appeals grew more strident when John Bozeman was killed on the trail east of Bozeman in April 1867. Doubting legitimacy of the emergency, General Sherman only authorized raising a defensive force to protect the Gallatin Valley.

In Albany, meanwhile, Lester had become active in the Union Party, a conglomerate of Republicans and northern Democrats. Intending to join his partners in Montana, he nonetheless felt obligated to remain in New York until the party’s convention in Syracuse on April 10. Shortly before he left the meeting, Lester again encountered fellow party member Horace Greeley in a hotel lobby. According to family legend, Greeley argued vehemently against the Montana venture, even calling Lester a “damned fool,” until the soldier silenced him by quoting the editor’s famous advice, “Go west, young man, and grow up with the country.”22 Greeley’s protests notwithstanding, Lester arranged to send a series of letters on Montana route—what he termed “the easiest way.”23 Arriving in Chicago, he purchased a ticket for the new Chicago and Northern line to Omaha. Spring floods had washed away portions of the road, however, and he was forced to idle away two weeks in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, before moving on to Omaha, where he took a Union Pacific passenger train to the end of the line at Platte City, then transferred to stagecoach.

Compared to Davis’s arduous trek, Lester’s journey was almost a pleasure. Rather than drearily plod across the prairie to camp for an afternoon in the shadow of a crude military post, Lester stopped off in Denver for several days to enjoy city comforts. The only Indians he saw during the trip by stage from Denver to Salt Lake never got close enough to be recognized. The only other scare was a false alarm when Lester and his fellow passengers mounted the top of the stagecoach, repeating rifles in hand, to ward off an attack that proved to be nothing more than another traveling party in the distance.24

After changing coaches at the Utah capital, Lester found himself traveling with Major William H. Lewis, an officer from nearby Fort Douglass whom General Sherman had dispatched to investigate the Montana “Indian War.” Arriving in Virginia City on May 19, the two men met with Acting Governor Meagher, then traveled the last leg of the journey together to the Syracuse Daily Standard, an uncompromising Union Party newspaper, to report on the new territory’s political progress.

Conflict on the Bozeman Trail had closed it to immigrant traffic, so Lester went by a different

21. Montana Post, April 6, 1867.
25. Willson was brevetted as a brigadier general for meritorious service during the Atlanta campaign on July 16, 1867, although his position with the quartermaster’s office would have entitled him to it. L. Willson, Military Records.
27. The number of Southern settlers in Gallatin County in 1867 is unknown, but evidence suggests that former Missouri residents were a sizable minority. Author Roberta Carkeek Cheney has maintained that Bozeman was actually called “Missouri” for a time by territorial residents, and 1870 census records show Missouri as the birthplace of the largest single group of Bozeman residents (excluding the garrison at Fort Ellis). Nellie Fletcher, a young woman passing through in 1866, noted the first family she met, the Guy’s, were adamant Southern sympathizers, having named their youngest son Jefferson Davis Guy. As late as 1869 travelers through Bozeman noted the prevalence of “pikers,” a derogatory reference to settlers from Pike County, Missouri. See Roberta Carkeek Cheney, Names on the Face of Montana (Missoula, Mont., 1971), 26; Ellen Gordon Fletcher, A Bride on the Bozeman Trail (Medford, Ore., 1970), 124; Aubrey L. Haines, ed., The Valley of the Upper Yellowstone (Norman, 1965), 9-10.
Bozeman. "I suppose you are made aware of the arrival of our distinguished Genl Willson to this country ere this," Davis wrote of Lester's arrival on May 22 to folks back home.25

I had only been back from our trip to Highland [a camp in Alder Gulch] but two or three days and it was somewhat unexpected—did not expect him for a month yet. He came down from Virginia with General Meagher—our acting governor. The governor came on ahead with his staff all mounted on horses. As they galloped up his first words were "Where is Mr. Willson?" (meaning your humble servant). I thought the d—— I was to pay. Upon showing myself to his August presence he said "your brother is behind in my carriage—will be here in half an hour—he thinks he is going to surprise you but I've got the start of him." Of course there was a little rejoicing among our household. The Governor makes a great deal of him and shows him up to the best of his ability—indeed he is quite a lion among our officials.26

Davis left town shortly after writing his letter home to help establish a branch store for the partnership at Emigrant Gulch in the Yellowstone Valley. From the diggings, he continued his letters to the Montana Post. After more than a year on the frontier, Davis, unlike his brother, presented his reports to a local constituency as an insider, intimately concerned with the developments of the territory's mines and Indian troubles. By contrast, Lester wrote his reports to an eastern newspaper, presenting his view of Montana more as a tourist than an active participant in its development. To be sure, he hoped to turn a profit there but only from a brief sojourn.

A year before, Bozeman had seemed a metropolis to Davis, who encountered it after months on an overland trail. But to Lester, who had taken the relatively easy route by way of Denver and Salt Lake City, the town may have seemed disappointing. Bozeman had grown from the six log cabins Davis had cheered so lustily the previous year, but the place Lester encountered still consisted of only a handful of buildings scattered along a muddy street stretching west of Sourdough Creek. In addition, there was a sizable contingent of settlers who came from Missouri and former Confederate states, and many of these people harbored resentment for things Northern, including merchants from New York.27 It was also a fickle populace with little loyalty to place. In June, for example, prospectors thought they had found a new strike near Emigrant Gulch and depopulated the Bozeman community faster than any threatened Indian invasion could have accomplished.28

After returning from a two hundred mile round-trip to Helena to get some letters from Mary Cory, Lester admitted in a letter to her: "You know that I was not very well pleased with Albany when I first went there, but I begin to think now that it is about as pleasant a spot as I could ever desire to see." Still, he was determined to see the Montana enterprise through. On the same day, June 12, Lester formalized his partnership with Tuller and Rich, with his share in the firm itemized as $2,511.42 in the cash books.29

Lester's determination would be severely tested during the latter half of 1867. Although the partners intended to base the firm strictly on cash sales, the realities of a frontier economy made exceptions inevitable, especially if they intended to reap some sort of gain from the militia muster. The Indian war turned out to be nothing more than a fruitless pursuit of isolated bands of suspected horse thieves. Eventually, the campaign cost the federal government $1,100,000 in claims presented by Montana merchants who had supplied the militia on credit.30 Before the action was concluded in fall 1867, the Tuller and Rich sales to the Montana Volunteers totaled $1,696.75. Nonetheless, the partners would have to wait until 1874 before the federal government approved payment of $1,182 based on a close scrutiny of the vouchers Lester Willson provided.31 Lester may have had hopes that a friendship with Acting Governor Meagher would lead to lucrative arrangements beyond mustering the militia, but those hopes dissolved when Meagher disappeared on July 18, presumably drowned after falling from a steamboat on the Missouri River.32

Whatever temporary unity the Indian threat had forged between Southern and Northern pioneers, it soon dissolved, and for their part,
Lester’s own actions did little to help the situation. Although he could report that Confederate veterans serving in the militia had sung Union war songs with hearty zeal, Lester lost no time plunging into divisive territorial politics. Joining with William White Alderson and other Northerners, he helped establish the Union League in Bozeman at a meeting on June 29. Formed during the war as a patriotic society, the Union League had evolved into a quasi-secret society that organized freedmen in reconstructed Southern states. It now had rituals and oaths almost Masonic in complexity and exclusiveness, and with Lester’s help it would attempt to leave its mark on Montana politics by insuring the future state would be dominated by the Republican Party.

Since its creation in 1864, Montana Territory had been perceived by some federal officials as a dangerous hotbed of secessionist sympathizers. In the first territorial elections that year Republicans attempted to fuse all northerners into a “Union Party,” but they were disappointed when Samuel McLean, backed by a coalition of Northern and southern Democrats, defeated their congressional candidate, Wilbur F. Sanders. Rivalry between the two factions escalated during the first territorial legislative assembly when Governor Sidney Edgerton demanded that all delegates take the “Iron Clad Oath.” Prescribed by Congress for every state in the reconstructed South, the oath was a solemn avowal that the prospective legislator had never borne arms against the United States. When Acting Governor Meagher, a Democrat, assumed his duties in late 1865, both factions worried over the nature of his true loyalties, and Northerners especially grew alarmed when Meagher allowed former Confederate soldier J. H. Rogers to assume a seat in the assembly without taking the oath in 1866.

Establishing the Union League in Bozeman during summer 1867 helped ritualize the Iron Clad Oath and demonize the Democrats as Copperheads and traitors. Prospective league members had to be voted on for acceptance and went through an elaborate ceremony of passwords and admonitions. Part of the charge given to new members warned them that “unpatriotic and designing men, nestling like venomous reptiles in all parts of our country, strive without shame or scruple (no matter what means are resorted to) the ascendency of civil power since their overwhelming defeat in the conflict of arms.”

Lester and others soon discovered, as had Union League organizers in the South, that the secrecy and uncompromising nature of their organization could have adverse consequences. In the

South reactionaries eventually formed their own secret society, the Ku Klux Klan, and in Bozeman, the Southerners who dominated the local Masonic lodge seem to have begun to view with suspicion petitions to join from Northern men. Whether Gallatin Lodge Number 6 discriminated against Northerners systematically, membership became increasingly difficult for anyone to obtain. The situation eventually grew so serious that in 1870 Nathaniel P. Langford, Grand Master of Montana Territory, temporarily revoked the lodge’s charter.36

There was backlash at the polls as well. Lester and his fellow Union Leaguers had great hopes for the Union ticket in 1867, but Democratic candidate James E. Cavanaugh soundly defeated Wilbur Sanders in Gallatin County, 1,037 to 633, and carried the territory with a majority of 1,101. The embarrassment was acute for Lester, a Union League organizer and member of the Union Party’s national committee.37

The approaching winter, meanwhile, had a dampening effect on the brothers’ enterprise as well, not to mention their spirits. As partner Loren Tuller said, it was frustrating living in a country where people considered a dried apple a luxury. Davis soon returned from Emigrant Gulch, discouraged after the new diggings failed to draw enough business to support the branch store he had tried to establish on behalf of the partnership. A bright spot, however, was construction of Fort Ellis, which began in September three miles from town. The work created a ready market for grain, produce, and construction materials. The garrison’s business proved critical to Bozeman’s survival, coming as it did when traffic from the Bozeman Trail had all but ceased. Lester stayed on through December, long enough to be on hand for an important Christmas Day election that insured that Bozeman would remain the county seat. On January 25, 1868, he left for the East, perhaps entertaining the idea of remaining there permanently and letting Davis manage his investment in the Montana partnership. If so, he soon reconsidered.38

Lester left Albany a prominent member of the Union Party off to secure his fortune and advance his cause in a new territory. Less than eight months later, he returned a struggling shopkeeper from a hostile frontier lost to the Democrats. The soldier’s home, plagued by legislative audits, would soon be shut down. With his old job gone, he turned his attention to Emma Weeks. With Emma and her friend, Mary Cory, Lester enjoyed sleighing parties and social gatherings, and as time drew near for his return to Montana he proposed marriage to Emma formally, and she agreed. “The prize I have won is the foundation of more hopes and joys than I can tell,” he wrote to Mary Cory from Montana the following summer. “I await anxiously but as patiently as may be my release from exile in this wild country.” Lester had returned to the “wild country” that spring, taking the train as far as Cheyenne and then journeying the rest of the way by stage via Salt Lake City.39

Arriving in Bozeman about the first of May, Lester found both town and business arrangements changed. Loren Tuller had left the firm in March and returned to New York as soon as the spring thaw allowed. Charles Rich, who had overseen the store’s operation through the winter, had prepared to rent the so-called “Bozeman Hall,” a large frame building that had been constructed across the street the previous fall. The lower floor provided twice the space for inventory, and the upper level served as the town’s largest gathering place for dances and meetings. Rich, who planned to bring his wife and children out from New York, wanted to partition some of that second-floor space for a family apartment.40

Bozeman itself had grown considerably. Davis noted that a dance party in February had counted fifty-two women, a number far in excess of any previous Bozeman gathering and likely bolstered by the wives and laundresses from the garrison at Fort Ellis. By summer 1868, buildings of finished lumber outnumbered log cabins along Main Street. Bishop Daniel S. Tuttle, who preached the first Episcopal service in town that July, estimated Bozeman at near forty dwellings, with two stores in addition to the Willson and Rich establishment. But for all the trappings of settlement and progress, the little hamlet remained a frontier outpost. Bishop Tuttle felt compelled to carry a gun while walking on the outskirts of town and complained that the spring wholesale supply shipments had

38. Dennis Seibel, Fort Ellis, Montana Territory, 1867-1886 (Bozeman, Mont., 1996), 10-12; Montana Post, February 1, 1868.
not yet reached the town during his midsummer visit, forcing him to forgo sweetening his coffee with sugar. 41

Lester reentered territorial politics. 42 The 1868 legislative election would be held in September, and the general, with his well-known connection to the Union Party's national committee, was drawn into the contest for Gallatin County representative to the territorial legislature. Sheepishly he sent a copy of the election ticket to Emma. In a brief letter scribbled on the back, he wrote:

You are surprised to see this election ticket as I said I would have nothing to do with politics and without my knowledge this was gotten up; printed in the papers, etc., and I could do no better than to submit with good grace, though there is no prospect of my being elected—or at events little prospect—as there are too many Rebels here. 43

Lester's opponent was J. H. D. Street, a Southern-born attorney who had gained the Democratic nomination for Gallatin County's representative. His pessimism notwithstanding, Lester began to win over some of his "rebel" neighbors. His quiet humor and reputation for being an honest and industrious shopkeeper eventually attracted local Southerners willing to overlook his Union League activities. That September Lester won the election by only fourteen votes. "I must admit that there was a satisfaction in beating my opponent," he confided to Mary Cory, although she [Emma] would be very much surprised when I asked the question," he told Mary Cory, "as I had told her that I should never ask her to come.

I have thought all this time that I should return to the states this fall and settle down. But I cannot get away from here without a loss, am well established and doing much better than any place I know of East with the same amount of Capital. The future of the country does not look as dark as a year ago and as the RR approaches, which it does with a vigor unprecedented and unlooked for, we are given advantages and are near home and friends. I have [received] some goods this summer only 12 days from New York. 44

When December arrived Lester traveled to Virginia City to attend the fifth territorial legislative assembly, but the session proved anticlimactic. His major effort was to secure passage of an act officially establishing the name of "Bozeman City" for the Gallatin county seat. 45 As soon as the assembly adjourned on January 15, 1869, Lester boarded a stage for New York. After their wedding on March 2, Emma and Lester returned to Bozeman with a huge stock of goods, including Emma's piano. Learning from past mistakes, they avoided rail connections and made their passage to Fort Benton in the relative comfort of a Missouri River steamboat. At Fort Benton, the freight was unloaded for the long

42. Once returned to Bozeman, Lester resumed sending letters to the Syracuse Daily Standard, but the only response the paper printed was a terse "Montana has gone Democratic" on August 11, 1868.
43. Lester Willson to Emma D. Weeks, June 30, 1868, Collection 884, Mrs. Lester S. Willson Papers, 1864–1920, MSU Libraries (hereafter Mrs. L. Willson Papers).
44. Lester Willson to Mary Cory, September 18, 1869, ibid.
45. Farmington, voted as the Gallatin County seat in May 1866, was a proposed townsite owned by Charles Blakely. When the issue again surfaced in 1867 the vote was between Gallatin City and Farmington, although Bozeman was the intended location of the latter. A special act of the legislature was required to settle the confusion. See Laws of the Territory of Montana Passed at the Second Session of the Legislature (Virginia City, Montana Territory, 1866), 12; Laws of the Territory of Montana Passed at the Third Session of the Legislature (Virginia City, Montana Territory, 1866), 77; Laws, Memorials and Resolutions of the Territory of Montana passed at the Fifth Session of the Legislative Assembly (Helena, Montana Territory, 1869), 110.
When Lester Willson brought Emma to Bozeman as a new bride in summer 1869, he presented her with what may have been the finest residence in Bozeman at the time. The house pictured at right was a remodeled and enlarged log cabin dating from 1864 and newly covered in clapboards. Below, Lester stands with his family in an undated photograph that includes (from left) sons Eugene and Fred (foreground), Emma, and Davis’s wife. Davis married Martha Van Allen on May 18, 1874.

journey overland to Gallatin County. Arrived at Bozeman, Lester took Emma to their new home, a large log cabin, which stood just east of the Willson and Rich store. Built in 1864 by Daniel E. Rouse, Lester had purchased the cabin prior to his return east, had its log exterior covered with clapboards, and hired carpenters to add rooms during the remodeling. Like the Willson home, Bozeman soon covered its frontier origins with the veneer of civilization. New businesses began to take root along Main Street, forcing Willson to sharpen his business acumen and specialize in the types of merchandise the store offered. The arrival of a surveying crew led by William Milnor Roberts on August 29, 1869, from the projected Northern Pacific Railroad terminus in Washington state made Lester, and many others, think the railroad would arrive soon. “We are to have the N.P.R.R.,” he wrote Mary Cory the following February, “and ... we are waiting to get rich out of it.”

The railroad proved longer in coming than he thought, but Lester and Emma prospered with the growing town and learned to love the country. Several times in subsequent years they made plans to return east but always found some reason to postpone the move by investing money in mining claims or banking ventures. By the early 1870s, an influx of settlers from other parts of the country had diluted the number of Southerners in Gallatin County, and Lester eventually abandoned Union League activities. In 1872, he lobbied briefly and unsuccessfully for appointment as federal Indian commissioner for the territory. After serving in the 1868 legislature, he held to his professed aversion to politics and never again held elective public office.

Davis Willson succeeded in his apparent quest to find his own independent identity in Montana quite separate from his older brother. On April 24, 1869, Davis formally entered Gallatin Lodge Number 6, one of the last Northwesterners to be raised before the organization’s charter was revoked. Rather than join his brother, Lester helped form the rival lodge of

46. Lester Willson to Mary Cory, February 19, 1870, L. Willson Papers.
47. Charles Rich, Lester’s cousin, business partner, and fellow Union veteran,
did not join either Bozeman Masonic lodge even though he had been initiated into the fraternity before coming to Montana. Progressive Men of the State of Montana (Chicago, 1901), 815.
48. Bozeman Courier, April 7, 1915; Davis Willson information file, Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin College, Ohio.
Bozeman Number 18 three years later with at least two Confederate Army veterans, a move which may symbolize both the cooling political passions of the territory and the different paths the siblings had chosen. At Lester's death in 1919, the Butte Miner commented: "If some great writer had been looking for the perfect type of American citizen for his quiet hero of modern domestic life, if he had found General Willson, he would not have sought further." Lester's son, Fred F. Willson, became a leading Bozeman architect. In time, Fred's prominence overshadowed his father's reputation, much as Lester's had overshadowed Davis's. Fred Willson's contributions to Bozeman's development were honored by a later generation when a Bozeman junior high school was named for him in 1956. Today, Bozeman residents encounter the tangible legacy of the ornate downtown theater, the art deco county courthouse, and other public buildings Fred designed. Fortunately, documents Lester rifled during his speech to the Contemporary Club in 1901 connect his accomplishments with those of his son Fred and his brother Davis in early territorial Montana.

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Later in life, brothers Lester (left, circa 1898) and Davis (right, 1898) went separate ways. Lester continued in the mercantile business while Davis became a Presbyterian minister in the late 1880s. He pastored to small Gallatin County congregations, including one at Hamilton, whose church is shown at right.