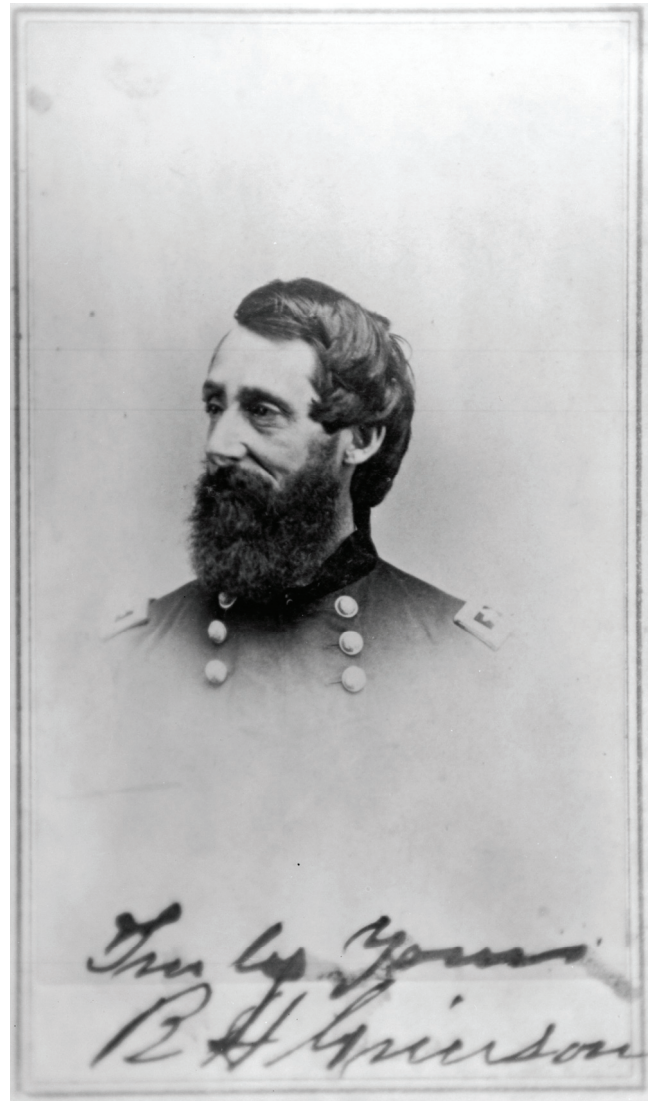


# Ben Grierson

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Although he represents one of the more pivotal figures in the development of West Texas after the Civil War, Ben Grierson's name probably would not raise many eyebrows today. Musician, citizen soldier, professional soldier, area booster and land speculator, family man, valiant but unsuccessful businessman, Grierson's legacy covers several pivotal moments in the Civil War plus twenty-five years of distinguished military service in Kansas, Indian Territory (today's Oklahoma), West Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. His three decades commanding the famed Buffalo Soldiers of the 10th Cavalry qualifies him to rank among the top tier of Indian Wars field commanders, but the more flashy names of Crook, Custer, MacKenzie and Miles have captured Indian Wars historians.



Like many of his age, Ben was not born in the west but his family eventually migrated there. His parents hailed from Ireland and they sailed to America in 1818, arriving in New York, making their way to Philadelphia, then west to Pittsburgh, where Ben appeared in 1826, and finally onto Youngstown, Ohio, which then had not yet taken on its industrial appearance. An incident at age eight nearly ended his life but also brought an irony to his eventual career. He was thrown off a horse and as he got up, the horse reared and kicked him in the head and for two weeks he lay in a near-death coma. While he eventually recovered, he never lost his mistrust of horses, an odd trait for a future, famed cavalry commander. And he had an ugly scar too, but he eventually grew a beard that hid the mark until his death in 1911.

Ben acquired a fascination of and a talent for music as a child, He could memorize simple and then more complex tunes and he taught himself on a flute borrowed from a neighbor. Ben noted

that he became obsessed with music that "I could think of but little else, being unwilling to give up playing the flute even to eat or sleep." He received professional instruction from the community band leader and eventually mastered the drum, piano, violin, guitar, and clarinet. By 1840 he was playing with the Youngstown Band and serving as its leader at the young age of 13. Music represented an integral influence and joy in his life, easily transferable to his future military years when he would encourage and support regimental bands and post concerts and other musical events.

His future wife, partner, and counsel, Alice Kirk, also called Youngstown home. Alice's father, John, was a blend of social liberalism for the day in his anti-slavery, temperance, and women's suffrage views along with his tight grip on his children's social lives, and he did not approve of Ben courting his daughter! After he caught them, against his expressed wishes, visiting at his home (it seems Ben climbed an outside trellis to gain access to the house), he sent Alice away to school in two more distant Ohio communities. She left on September 5, 1845; it would be three years before they would see one another again.

Courtship resumed when she returned to Youngstown, despite John Kirk's objections. Ben was not a totally unsuitable future husband, but his informal and erratic career as a musician troubled Alice's father and Ben's lack of religious commitment and fondness for liquor and cigars troubled Alice! When Ben's family decided to move further west to Jacksonville, Illinois, the courtship collapsed. She toiled as a schoolteacher in various locations for several years, and by 1853 she was hired to teach in Springfield, Illinois, and who happened to visit that city as a conductor of the community band, see Alice's name listed on a posted public announcement for the school! Years of separation and doubt melted away; the courtship resumed in earnest; Mr. Kirk was convinced or resigned to his strong-willed daughter's choice, and they were married on September 24, 1854.

Their first child, Charles Henry, came in 1855, spurring Ben to consider something more lucrative than music where he was creatively successful but financially not so much! An opportunity came to assume a half interest in a mercantile operation in Meredosia, Illinois. A second son, John Kirk came in 1856, a national election year and Ben got absorbed in the newly created Republican Party, an interest he would carry throughout his adult life. The late 1850s were challenging as the Panic of 1857 saddled Ben's business with debt; and bronchitis and later pneumonia claimed their second son just days after his second birthday.

The Griersons suffered through the decade with their grief over a lost child and ever-declining finances. The turn-about Ben always optimistically expected never came; he had borrowed money from various sources to acquire his share of the business; and his efforts at commodity speculations made matters worse. The national political scene was equally uncertain with the slavery question boiling and the election of 1860 promising to have severe consequences. Ben and his brother John became very active in the state Republican Party. Ben's father-in-law refused a critical loan to keep the business going in 1860, but the year ended on a high note on December 2 with the birth of a son, Robert Kirk.

Dramatic and swift change came to both the Griersons and the nation in early 1861. His business was liquidated to settle debts with creditors; and the family moved back to Jacksonville to live

with the Kirks. Meanwhile, Southern states were leaving the Union and the Civil war broke out on April 12, 1861 with the firing upon Fort Sumter, South Carolina. Ben was initially hesitant to fight "my brothers in the South," but a chance errand in May brought him to a political acquaintance in Cairo, Illinois, Colonel Prentiss of the 10th Illinois Infantry. Prentiss offered him an aide's position at the rank of lieutenant, an unpaid position, but it set Ben on a course that would see him a national hero in two years.

Grierson languished for months with Prentiss's unit but eventually used his political contacts and received an appointment as major with the 6th Illinois Cavalry, and his leadership and organizational skills soon received recognition as he improved his battalion's sloppy camp, drills, and appearance. Still, no combat opportunities came, but the regiment's anger with its appointed colonel caused him to resign in disgrace and by mid-April 1862 Ben Grierson found himself the regimental commander at the rank of colonel. The position, security, and the pay put the family back on better footing.

For the rest of the year Grierson's 6th Illinois Cavalry performed well in a range of scouts, skirmishes, and minor battles near Memphis, Tennessee. His performance was noted by the high command, especially General Sherman. In 1863 Grierson would lead a behind-the-lines raid that would bring him national fame.

The Civil War was approaching its two-year mark as 1862 turned into 1863, and the Union needed a great victory or breakout strategy. Grierson had originally felt this would be a long conflict and he now chafed with inactivity with three regiments of cavalry under his command; soon a promotion to brigadier general would elevate both his standing and finances. With the siege of Vicksburg by Grant at a stalemate, on April 17, Grierson's brigade was sent south from LaGrange, Tennessee behind the Confederate lines to destroy railroad lines and supplies, cause havoc, and draw off troops in Mississippi from any duty that would help besieged Vicksburg. In sixteen days Grierson's command marched 600 miles, an epic pace; they destroyed 60 miles of track and telegraph wire plus huge levels of supplies; they killed or captured hundreds with a loss of but a handful killed, sick, wounded, or missing. Grierson's Raid ended at Union-held Baton Rouge where he received--against his wishes--a celebratory parade.

Crusty General Sherman called this "the most brilliant expedition of the war." Grierson's image appeared on the front pages of several national publications; major city newspapers reported on what was now called the "great raid." In a letter to Alice, Ben noted that like Byron, he "had to wake up in the morning and find myself famous." In four years he had gone from an unknown, bankrupt storekeeper to a national hero. More service under various commanders followed, and in late December of 1864 and early January of 1865 Grierson repeated his success with another raid through Mississippi from east to west, ending at Vicksburg. This second raid covered 450 miles in sixteen days, destroying an impressive level of tracks, lines, supplies, buildings and equipment. If you ever enjoyed the 1958 John Ford movie, "The Horse Soldiers" with John Wayne, you have seen a fictional version of these raids.

Grierson received a second star and closed out the War as a Major General of Volunteers. He seemed to not have a clear picture of where he fit into the last months of the War or the first months of the peace. On August 27, 1865 their first daughter, Edith Claire, came and on January

15, 1866, Ben, like hundreds of thousands in blue, was mustered out of the Army, but he would not remain a civilian for long as his Civil War years had given him a clear career path. He would continue to make his mark, but now west of the Mississippi.

While the United States Army quickly shrank from 1,000,000 to about 55,000 in a year or so, Congress took a dramatic step in the summer of 1866 and created six regiments, later reduced to four, of African-American soldiers. Thousands of blacks had served well in the past war, and Congress's action represented the first time blacks would serve in the regular peace-time Army. "Peace" was a relative term in the late 1860s with the ongoing tensions of Reconstruction in the South and inevitable conflicts between settlers and Native Americans in the West. Grierson had served with black soldiers and he saw their good service first-hand, so when General Grant offered him the command of the 10th Cavalry, Grierson quickly accepted. His service with the 10th would last twenty-five years across many assignments in the midwest and southwest.

Grierson would organize his new regiment at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where his organization skills not to mention his patience would be severely tested. Recruitment of quality applicants was slow and at one point after a run of misfits sent to him, Grierson scolded a recruiting officer at Memphis with the rebuke, "you will have to foot the bill for your rejects in the future." Pulling together a cadre of officers willing to work with black troops and sensitive to the special needs proved difficult also as not all shared Grierson's confidence in this "experiment." To compound his troubles, Grierson's commander at Fort Leavenworth, General William Hoffman, disliked black soldiers and any officers who served with them. Hoffman made Grierson's stay at the post most unpleasant with an array of petty charges, complaints, and insults. He even forbade Grierson's troops from participating in post parades and had the black troops stand distant from the white troops.

To his credit, Grierson protested strongly, but he knew his best salvation was to get his new command away from Hoffman and into the field where they could train and achieve away from prejudicial eyes and ears. Grierson also stood his ground in noting that his command was not to be referred to as "colored" in any report, they were simply "Tenth Regiment of Cavalry, U. S. Army." One by one his companies were outfitted and sent to other stations and on July 30, 1867 he received welcome news that his headquarters would move to Fort Riley, Kansas, closer to the areas sorely in need of federal protection. The troops guarded the Kansas-Pacific railroad construction crews with some troops sent to various stations in Indian Territory. Meanwhile, Benjamin Henry Grierson, Jr, afterwards called Harry, arrived back at Fort Riley. Ben was most pleased, noting that "if the name of Grierson be not perpetuated, it will be no fault of mine."

The Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 was supposed to calm conflicts in Kansas and Indian Territory, but the federal government's failure to implement the treaty issues promptly resulted in new violence, and Grierson and troops were sent to Forts Cobb, Arbuckle, and Gibson. A new post was needed further west, and Grierson played a key role in the site selection and he and his Buffalo Soldiers of the 10th Cavalry coordinated construction of the permanent post at Camp Wichita at Medicine Bluffs, a facility soon named Fort Sill and still a major Army post today.

The Army took somewhat of a back seat in the early 1870s as the strategy now shifted to what became known as the Quaker Peace Policy, with the reservations managed by members of the

Society of Friends with the US government providing allotments of food, supplies, as well as protection. Grierson's natural humanity as well as a sense of practicality supported this policy; his less charitable officers and men nicknamed it a "Feed 'em in the winter and fight them in the summer" approach. Matters deteriorated, especially in North Texas, and Grierson's 10th were hard-pressed to protect the elusive foe on both sides of the Red River.

Texans flooded Washington with complaints, and a doubtful General Sherman made a special Texas inspection tour on April of 1871, passing through San Antonio, then onto Forts McKavett, Concho, and Griffin, and eventually Richardson. Seeing little to convince him of the troubles, Sherman soon got a wake-up call when the severely wounded lone surviving teamster of a freight team crawled into Richardson noting their being attacked at a spot and time not far or long after Sherman's small crew had passed it. Quickly changing his outlook, Sherman ordered Colonel Ranald Mackenzie of the post's 4th Cavalry to capture the band that attacked the wagon train, and he headed north to Fort Sill, where he met his Civil War comrade Ben. Several chiefs at Fort Sill boastfully admitted to the raid and their arrest verged on a violent confrontation, but Grierson's shrewd posting of troops and his personal courage probably prevented a major loss of life, not to mention General Sherman's death. After additional duty to the east, Grierson received a break with the assignment as the Superintendent of the Mounted Recruiting Service in St. Louis. He, Alice and their growing family (now they had five children) were united and could enjoy the civilization of a major city.

Back in Texas the Indian raids along the Red River continued and it would fall the Ranald Mackenzie's 4th Cavalry to make North Texas safe for settlement as he defeated the Comanches in two engagements in 1872 and 1874, but to the west the Apaches posed a major threat. On the political front Congress shrank the Army again in 1874 to about 25,000 officers and enlisted men, a paltry level that would remain the same until the Spanish-American War a quarter-century later. Grierson's time in St. Louis abruptly ended in 1875 when he and his regiment were transferred to West Texas and Fort Concho. Ben's brother John could not find the post on any map and concluded that Ben had been banished to "the most God-forsaken part of Uncle Sam's Dominions." Alice informed her husband that she would await her husband's assurance that decent quarters awaited them, staying in Jacksonville with the children.

Upon arrival Ben found a post in relative shambles with buildings in poor repair, three foot tall weeds on the Parade Ground, and packs of dogs wandering at will. While he tried to set the post into better order, he was passed over for a major field command as Colonel Shafter from Fort Duncan to the south would assume command of many of Grierson's cavalry and attempt to sweep the Staked Plains clean of hostiles. Approaching 50, Grierson pondered his future with the army, noting to Alice in a letter that he should consider another career, and he suggested that his decision be done twice in the manner of the Old Goths and Vandals, "once drunk so that the Council would not lack vigor or vim and spirit and once sober--that--due regard be given to discretion." Alice's response was swift and blunt, telling him that he needed to stay the course, they needed that salary, and they could not indulge in far fetched dreams.

So he stayed! And the family came to stay at Concho where he and they enjoyed some triumphs and tragedies, both professional and personal. Ben oversaw the end of the threat of hostile Indian

activity in West Texas with a far-reaching strategy of scouting missions, stringing of telegraph lines for improved communications, mapping of the region's water holes, and creation of scattered sub-posts that served as the eyes and ears for the home post at Concho. When Chief Victorio of the Warm Springs Apaches broke out of the reservation at San Carlos, Arizona and raided in the Big Bend area, Ben's years of mapping and scouting paid off as he and the 10th time and again blocked the warriors from known water sources and eventually forced them back in Mexico where they were defeated.

Water played a pivotal role in a less successful mission under Captain Nolan who led the 10th from Concho in pursuit of warriors and eventually got lost on the Staked Plains in the summer of 1877, enduring 80-plus hours without water. Grierson cited the harsh and unusual circumstances when several soldiers were tried for desertion in that mission, but he was not heeded. Grierson also had less than charming relationships with the civilians at the little village across the river from the fort that eventually became San Angelo. On two occasions riots occurred when his black troopers were assaulted. Personal loss struck the family in the summer of 1878 when their only daughter, Edith, became ill with what was eventually diagnosed as typhoid fever. She rallied and seemed to improve, but she passed away in the evening of September 9, 1878. Thus Ben and Alice buried three of their seven children over time. Ben's work in West Texas was commendable, and he anticipated promotion to brigadier general, but he was passed over for officers he considered less worthy. Not a West Point grad, and not a favorite of his divisional commander Phil Sheridan, Ben harbored some anger and mistrust of the Army's inner-sanctum that left citizen-soldiers as himself outside the club.

While Fort Concho lasted another seven years, it was clear that troops could be sent elsewhere, and Grierson's 10th went to Fort Davis in the Big Bend Mountains. A more temperate climate at the higher elevations, better quarters, fewer campaigns and scouts to manage, and access to luxuries closer to a railroad, all made Davis a more pleasant stay than their previous posting. Always trying to improve his financial future, Grierson invested heavily in area land, both as an investment. but also as a future career for two of his sons who had bouts of mental stress. He and Alice were aware of the history of mental illness on her family's side, and two of their sons were touched by the unfortunate gene. Grierson was convinced that the Big Bend area would be a haven for rest, recreation and tourism; subsequent developments after the 1920s proved him right.

Continuing his professional journey west, he and the 10th were ordered to the Department of Arizona in March of 1885, and at Fort Davis at the end of the month the entire regiment was assembled in one place for the first time in its history. Grierson and his headquarters command stayed at Whipple Barracks near Prescott while the rest of the regiments got scattered to four other posts. Soon he was made commander of the District of New Mexico, with quarters at Santa Fe, a large community with most of the modern conveniences and luxuries the Griersons only read about the past twenty years. His talents at quiet diplomacy, negotiation, and quick assessments won him several accolades as he solved several problems between and among the Navajos and area settlers.

On the home front he and Alice struggled to provide for sons Robert & Charles and in late 1887 Alice fell ill with a tumor in her leg that worsened the next year, and she died in August.

Grierson dealt with grief by concentrating on his work; and in late 1888 he was promoted again to command the Department of Arizona, headquartered in Los Angeles. He relinquished his command of the 10th Cavalry that he had led for twenty-two years, noting that its "gallant and zealous devotion to duty ... cannot fail, sooner or later...to meet with due recognition and reward."

He continued with his skills as a negotiator and problem-solver in his latest command, always promoting the needs of the Native Americans in his district, and again being a futurist in noting the potential of vast areas for farming and production if irrigation were encouraged and funded. Both his immediate family and his in laws had one crisis or problem after another, but Ben maintained his focus and in the spring of 1890 the death of General Crook created a vacancy that resulted in his long-sought promotion to brigadier general on April 5, 1890. His career was vindicated in a way, but he enjoyed the star for just a few months as he reached retirement age of sixty-four on July 8 of that year.

Ben's did not enjoy a care-free retirement as his financial investments, land speculation, and other business interests never provided sufficient cash flow. He spent his first ten years of retirement split between Fort Davis and Jacksonville, tending to his family and business interests. His father-in law passed away in 1891 and his brother in 1894. Son Charles had a substantial army career, but stress overcame him eventually and he died at St. Elizabeth's in Washington DC in 1928. Robert had been committed to a sanitarium and he died in 1922. Harry and George remained on the ranch land Ben had acquired when he commanded Fort Davis. They and Ben fell further apart as they expected more financial support from Ben. His remarrying a Jacksonville widow in 1897 alienated them even more. On a trip to Pennsylvania and Ohio in 1907 he caught a serious case of the flu then had a serious stroke, and declined for several years until his death on August 31, 1911. He was buried beside his beloved Alice; only one son, Charles, could or would attend his service.

The Grierson name that Ben predicted would live on eventually ended as sons Robert and George never married; Harry did but had no children; Charles married and had a son who, in turn, did not marry, and his two daughters Sarah Joy and Alice passed away in 1978 and 1979.

At Ben's funeral the minister praised him as an affectionate and friendly man, honest and fearless, a man who always tried to do what he thought was right. Years ahead of his time in his treatment of blacks and Indians, he also could see the potential on West Texas, but its fulfillment came generations after his passing. Ben wasn't a disciplinarian by nature, but his measured leadership of the newly created 10th Regiment ensured both its achievements and respect. While he was a failure in business, Ben Grierson was a success in many other ways, and West Texas should consider him as one of the key people in this region's heritage.

