John Elisha Phelps was the son of John S. Phelps, U.S. Representative and governor of Missouri. During the Civil War he was a lieutenant in the 3rd U.S. Cavalry and was colonel of the 2nd Arkansas Cavalry (Union), which he organized. The history of his military career is made up of excerpts from official records, and letters from Eugene A. Carr and John B. Sanborn (1877).