

THE EXPEDITIONS OF
John Charles
Frémont

MAP PORTFOLIO

COMMENTARY BY
DONALD JACKSON

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS
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MAPS OF THE
JOHN CHARLES FRÉMONT
EXPEDITIONS

With the permission of my co-editor, I write these comments in the first person singular. I wish to be responsible for the nature of the remarks as well as their content, for most of the geographic-cartographic observations in Vol. 1 of the *Expeditions* are mine. The expertise of my collaborator, Dr. Mary Lee Spence, is evident everywhere in the work, but co-editors must of necessity divide their labors.

An everlasting debate among practitioners of our craft revolves around the question: how far should a general editor of an extensive work go into specialized aspects of the materials he is preparing? Naturally, the first duty of an editor is to search out, and present in as nearly their original form as possible, the documents concerning his subject. When he has done this to the fullest practicable extent (meaning that he must stop collecting *sometime*, knowing that he is sure to miss a few documents anyway), then he is free to explicate.

But the editor who attempts to exhaust his subject through annotation is not only doomed to failure—he has missed the whole point of his calling. An editor's work is meant to be pillaged.

Our notes in the *Expeditions* contain a good deal of detail about Frémont's routes, his geographic observations, and his maps. But the history of cartography is a highly specialized subdivision of the history of exploration. I may claim some years of study and publication in the field of western American history, but in the cartographic field I claim no knowledge comparable to that of men like the late Carl I. Wheat, or Dale L. Morgan at the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, Calif., or Herman R. Friis at the National Archives in Washington.

The cartographic expert may specialize on a grand scale, like Wheat, whose *Mapping the Transmississippi West* requires five

volumes. Or he may find satisfaction in a geographic microcosm, like Fred I. Green, of Reno, Nev., who spent years of informed speculation about the point at which Frémont's party crossed the Sierras in 1844. Green went so far as to collate Frémont's sparse remarks about geological formations with his own observations on the geology of the region. Yet his speculations, never published except in our inadequate summary in Vol. 1, are at variance with the findings of Vincent P. Gianella, who also knows the area at first hand.

Then I appeared on the scene in 1968, equipped with a station wagon, sleeping bag, and many pounds of U.S. Geological Survey maps. That I was at a disadvantage over local men such as Green and Gianella became immediately apparent. I had followed Frémont from Kansas City, Mo., to the mouth of the Walla Walla, on down to the Dalles of the Columbia, and south through parts of Oregon and Nevada. Now I was ready to track the expedition over the Sierras into California. I pondered, I climbed, I rustled those maps, and I backtracked to Carson City to talk to James W. Calhoun, director of the Nevada State Museum. Months later, however, when I wrote my footnotes for that portion of Frémont's journal, I found myself relying heavily upon the published work of Gianella and the notes given me by Fred I. Green.

Yet, I wrote my notes with immensely greater confidence, having been there. I would not choose to be an armchair editor of travel narratives.

This commentary is designed to introduce, not to analyze in depth, the printed maps associated with Frémont. The letters and documents in Vol. 1 of the *Expeditions* should be consulted for an understanding of how these maps were conceived and made; and for deeper analysis, other studies are recommended.¹

The maps in this collection are relevant to all of the expedi-

¹ The most comprehensive survey of western American cartography is still Carl I. Wheat, *Mapping the Transmississippi West*, 5 vols. (San Francisco, 1957-63). Cartography also figures heavily in William H. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West, 1803-63* (New Haven, Conn., 1959). A packet of maps inside the back cover, and many smaller ones within the text, are most useful. See also Carl I. Wheat and Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and His Maps of the American West* (San Francisco, 1954). One of Herman

tions, even though they are issued together as a supplement to Vol. 1. For example, the 1848 map which appears here was published with Frémont's *Geographical Memoir*, a document which may not appear in our series until Vol. 3. Anyone who has tried to use a very large map which is bound inside a book, without eventually tearing it, should appreciate our publisher's decision to issue these maps in a separate form.

As only printed maps are included, several manuscript maps can be consulted only at the National Archives. Among these are manuscript versions of the Nicollet map, a map of the Des Moines River as high as the Raccoon Fork which Frémont made during a special reconnaissance, and the manuscript of the enormously important map of 1845 (our Map 3).²

MAP 1

Joseph Nicolas Nicollet was Frémont's mentor and intellectual superior, and his map—a veritable landmark in cartography—must always be known as a “Nicollet map.” But my helpful friend and consultant, Dale L. Morgan, easily convinced me that it ought to be included here because there is so much of Frémont in it. This was the work which trained Frémont in cartography, and the fact that he labored long and hard is easily shown by the documents in the early portion of Vol. 1. Besides his work in the field during the Nicollet expeditions of 1838 and 1839, Frémont assisted the ailing scientist (who died before he could finish his studies) in the laborious task of refining their sketches and calculations after they had returned to Washington.

“Frémont, who is very thin and who has never left me for an hour, asks me to give you his respects, as well as your charming family. We have not had a day of rest since we are here. I am so

R. Friis' many contributions to the field is “The Image of the American West at Mid-Century (1840–60),” in *The Frontier Re-examined*, ed. by John Francis McDermott (Urbana, Ill., 1967), pp. 49–63.

²All these maps are in Record Group 77. See, for example, U.S. Maps 41 and 131 for Nicollet, and Map Q 7-1 for the Des Moines River map entitled “A Survey of the Des Moines River from the Raccoon Fork to the Mouth Made in July 1841 by Lieut. J. C. Fremont, Corps. Topl. Engineers.”

anxious to finish it [the map], to go and recover my health with my friends in St. Louis" (Nicollet to Jules de Mun, Washington, D.C., 1 Dec. 1840, Missouri Historical Society).

I have often wondered why Wheat did not consider Nicollet's work to be "Transmississippi" in nature, and include it in Vol. 1 of his sweeping study of western cartography. It clearly extended our knowledge of the Missouri River region between St. Louis and Fort Pierre, and of the region between Devils Lake and the headwaters of the Mississippi.

A set of manuscript charts which shows how the two men cooperated in their field observations is too extensive to be presented here, consisting of sixty-seven folio sheets tracing their day-to-day progress up the Missouri in 1839. Some of the earliest sheets are missing, and the charts begin just below the Auxvasse, in Missouri, on 7 April, extending to Fort Pierre (now Pierre, S.D.), 12 June 1839. The final three sheets show the overland route of the party from Pierre to Devils Lake. Folios 386-87 show the area traversed in late April and early May, including the highly important complex of trading houses and missionary establishments in the present Omaha area.

These charts, bearing many notations in the hand of Frémont as well as Nicollet (some in French), are the earliest large-scale charts of the Missouri that I have seen. The original manuscripts comprise Part 2, Vol. 2, of the Nicollet Papers, Library of Congress.

The Nicollet map was issued in a rather small edition in 1842, without the accompanying report, and at a scale of 1/600,000. The report and map were published the following year by the Senate—the map redrawn to a scale of 1/1,200,000—and again published by the House in 1845. Copies of the 1842 map seem to be rather scarce today. I found one in the National Archives, two in the Library of Congress, but did not attempt a full census.³

For the 1843 edition which was to accompany the report, the map was done over completely. The format was enlarged to a point where Nicollet complained that detail was lost, the lettering was redone, and many place-names were added. For example, on the 1842 version there are no towns within the interior of

³ The Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, has issued a reprint of the 1843 Nicollet map from the original plates.

Illinois, but the 1843 version (our Map 1) shows several of the more important settlements.

Most of the river courses are the same on the two maps, but one notable exception is the Platte. This difference may have resulted from Frémont's surveys on his 1842 expedition, which produced a more accurate course of the Platte than any previous map, and which he could easily have added to the 1843 edition upon his return. At that time, he and Nicollet were still engaged in what the government considered the same project, the mapping of the Mississippi Valley and certain territories lying to the west.

The toponymy of the map suggests that Nicollet and Frémont, like most explorers including Lewis and Clark, had little success assigning place-names which would hold up from generation to generation. One exception is the little lake on a western tributary of the Shayenn-Oju River, now the Sheyenne, below the Devils Lake area, where the map shows "Lake Jessie." There is still a remnant of a lake there today, near the small town of Jessie in Griggs County, N.D. Young John Charles thus honored Jessie Benton, whom he would marry in 1841.

Frémont's fame had already begun to spread before the appearance of the final Nicollet map, because publication of his own report of the 1842 expedition to the Wind River Mountains preceded Nicollet's report and map. Asbury Dickins, secretary to the Senate, was enclosing a copy of Frémont's work to Samuel Breese as early as 6 June 1843, while advising that the large Nicollet map had not yet been printed. Dickins forwarded, instead, a copy of the smaller 1842 map. Dickins was still waiting—and chafing—for the large map when he wrote to J. J. Abert on 12 July 1843, saying that expensive corrections were still being made and that there were to be 300 copies of the large map printed for Congress (see Record Group 46, Letterbook 3, National Archives, for both documents). Larger editions for public consumption followed later.

Publication of the Nicollet map came near the end of this notable scientist's career, and it helped to launch the career of his protégé. Frémont was now qualified to strike out upon his own as an explorer and surveyor, aided in part by the reputation he had earned under Nicollet's tutelage, but even more by the happy fact that he had married the daughter of the West's most powerful and outspoken senator, Thomas Hart Benton. The American public would soon be reading of Frémont's first truly

“western” exploration and avidly studying the map which is next on our list.

MAP 2

Just as we might have omitted Map 1 because it is nominally Nicollet's, we might have passed over this one because the data later appear on the larger map which Frémont published in 1845 (our Map 3), after his expedition to California. But this map has an importance all its own and deserves reproduction as a landmark in western American cartography.

First, there is no guesswork here, no reliance on “the best authorities.” Assisted by the very able surveyor and cartographer, Charles Preuss, Frémont put down only those features of the land which he or members of his party had seen and charted. The result is a good deal of white paper—left to be filled in by his successors.

Second, the map and its accompanying journal brought both Frémont and his sponsoring agency, the Corps of Topographical Engineers, strongly to the attention of a public just beginning to filter into the far West. It became a kind of road map of the Oregon and California trails, though extending only as far as the Continental Divide. Preuss would later turn out a series of far more useful cartographic guides to Oregon (our Map 4 in seven sections).

One needs to remember, when inspecting printed maps, that he is seeing a highly refined product. The final printed sheet was pulled from the lithographer's plate after careful engraving by craftsmen in Washington or Baltimore (in this case E. Weber & Co., Baltimore). Its finely incised lines and neat, small lettering are the work of an artisan, not a cartographer. The original manuscript, now apparently lost, would have been drawn by Preuss or an assistant, softer in line but as accurate as the calculations from the notebooks and field sketches could make it. Two or more manuscript drafts may have been made before Frémont and his superiors in the Corps had achieved what they wanted.

No one should believe that Frémont thought he was “path-finding” on the expedition which produced this map. He followed in the wagon ruts of westering families most of the way.

It was precisely for this reason—a population moving west—that he was ordered to make his reconnaissance and produce a dependable map of the route as far as South Pass.⁴

Only when the party reached the South Pass region, and made a side trip along the western slope of the Wind River range, was Frémont traveling over new ground. For his journal and some annotations for this part of his survey, see our Vol. 1, pp. 254–73.

I “explored” the routes shown on this map in the spring of 1967, but it was pretty much like armchair editing. Some of it, at least, was clearly station-wagon editing, for the lower trail parallels modern highways much of the way. I approximated his route along the Wind River Mountains, spent some rainy nights encamped beside Fremont Lake near Pinedale, Wyo., with my ubiquitous quadrangle maps, and concluded that local climbers and historians already knew far more about Frémont’s well-known ascent of a peak than I could ever determine. Readers of Vol. 1 will find me following Orin and Lorraine Bonney in naming Woodrow Wilson Peak as the one climbed by members of the exploring party.

MAP 3

When I say that this map of 1845 is one of a kind, one of the brightest documents in a veritable welter of maps appearing during Frémont’s generation, I am respectfully mindful of its predecessors.

Like a promising laboratory experiment that is never reported or a fine biography that never finds its way out of first draft, an unpublished map is mainly raw material for the historian. Fate comes in here. Lewis and Clark sent back to Thomas Jefferson in 1805 the great-grandfather of all western U.S. maps. It was not

⁴ There are many detailed studies of the Oregon and California trails. An excellent recent one, but limited to the routes along the Platte and North Platte, is Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1969). The bibliography in our Vol. 1 lists several others. The Mattes volume, though it follows the route of Frémont and other travelers only as far as Fort Laramie, deals with many topographic features which are mentioned in Frémont’s journal and shown on his map, and becomes a useful reference for studying these documents.

published until a century later, the nearest approach being an augmented but truncated version appearing in the 1814 edition of the Lewis and Clark narrative. Jedediah Smith, a traveler and geographer whose exploits are well known through the writings of Morgan, Wheat, and others, came to our attention mainly through the eyes and ears of other travelers. Albert Gallatin, onetime Secretary of the Treasury, compiled a map which, although published, drew little current attention.

The Frémont map of 1845 had these virtues: It was compiled and drawn by the men who had traveled the land under sometimes nearly unbearable circumstances. It was a "white space" map, like the one of 1843, because the makers chose to show only what they had seen—with a few exceptions.⁵ It was scientifically constructed, made during a period when men thought (too optimistically, at times) that they had learned to determine latitude and longitude with reasonable accuracy, and with instruments not unlike those still in use a generation later. Had Meriwether Lewis and William Clark been able to publish Clark's great production of 1804-5, redrawn by Washington cartographer Nicholas King the following year, it would have been a monument to skill and courage, but would have been useless to a nation still not ready to act upon the knowledge it provided. Frémont's 1845 production was the right map at the right time.

His determination to publish a document drawn principally from personal observation led him astray. He searched doggedly for the fabled Buenaventura River, leading from the Great Basin to the Pacific, though Gallatin and others had long since dispelled the legend. His journals mention his search for it—often with some skepticism—but his map shows that he failed to find the river. Certainly Frémont could have profited from a long interview with the unfortunate, short-lived Jedediah Smith.

The errors on the map are well known to scholars. The depiction of Great Salt Lake and Utah Lake as one body of water occurred because the party was unable to make a thorough investigation of the region. The headwaters of the Sacramento are

⁵ One notable exception: he laid down the outline of the Pacific Coast from the work of the English explorer, George Vancouver, who had done his charting in 1792-94 and whose map had been employed by Lewis and Clark several years before Frémont was born.

mistaken. Certain mountain ranges are drawn in conventionalized style, and would not be surveyed systematically until after the Civil War. The routes of the expedition as shown can be debated at length; not surprisingly, these men at times simply did not know where they were.

Perhaps the most important line on the map is the line of type sweeping down from the Blue Mountains of the Oregon country to the depths of the Mojave Desert. It describes Frémont's vital geographic discovery, the Great Basin, an enormous parcel of western America with no exterior drainage. Rivers rise there, then evaporate and disappear. The Great American Desert of Zebulon Pike and Stephen H. Long was mainly a point of view; Frémont's Great Basin was a geographic reality which only a man who had circumnavigated it, on foot and horseback, could comprehend.

Copies of this map soon became a base map which others used to expand the boundaries of cartographic knowledge. The actual plates appear to have been used, and added to, to produce the map of "New Mexico and the Southern Rocky Mountains" which resulted from the reconnaissance of Lieuts. J. W. Abert and W. G. Peck (reproduced in Wheat, 2:193). This was only natural, as the Abert-Peck survey was conducted as a part of Frémont's 1843-44 expedition. Rufus B. Sage's map in his *Scenes in the Rocky Mountains* (1846) is another adaptation, containing Sage's own routes and other additions.

Perhaps the most unusual and important use of the 1845 map as a base was not discovered until 1953, when Carl I. Wheat was working with the map collection of the American Geographical Society. He discovered a copy of the Frémont map containing penciled routes and notations, and frequent mentions of the names "Smith" and "J. S. Smith." Research proved that the added material had come from the famed western traveler, Jedediah S. Smith, and had been set down by George Gibbs, an early Oregonian. It is the closest thing to a Smith map that has come to light.⁶

It was a costly matter, getting this historical Frémont map before the public, considering the expenses of the expedition itself

⁶ For the full story of this discovery, see Wheat, Chap. 18, and Wheat and Morgan, both previously cited.

as well as the "back home" costs of preparation and printing. The cost of merely lithographing the map and the drawings for the 1845 edition of the journals, as billed to the government by E. Weber & Co., Baltimore, was \$9,851.30.⁷

Let Carl I. Wheat justify the cost of it all with this appraisal: "The year 1845 . . . because of a single event is in fact one of the towering years in the story of Western Cartography. In that year John C. Frémont's report of his journey to Oregon and California in 1843-44 was published. This report and the Frémont (Preuss) map which accompanied it, changed the entire picture of the West and made a lasting contribution to cartography" (Wheat, 2:194).

MAP 4 (in seven sections)

Readers of Charles Preuss' diary of his travels with Frémont,⁸ or even those excerpts in the footnotes in our own Vol. 1, will know him as a dour and often ungrateful curmudgeon, contemptuous of Frémont and indeed of much of the world (he later took his own life). But anyone who studies the maps presented here will recognize the work of a great cartographer.

We have not discovered who first conceived the idea of a large-scale map of the Oregon Trail, done in sections so that the wagon traveler could handle one section with ease, even on a windy day. It must have been decided soon after publication of the 1845 map and journals, for by 6 Jan. 1846 a proposal was made in the Senate to print 10,000 copies of such a map. It was hoped that copies might be made for ten cents each, maybe five. By the middle of April, a lithographer had been chosen (again, E. Weber & Co., Baltimore), and on 25 April the Senate engaged Preuss to do the work on terms he had proposed, "the compilation to commence 21st Ult., the day on which you began the work."⁹

⁷ Secretary to the Senate, Asbury Dickins, to Deacon H. Lewis, chairman of the Committee on Finance, 15 April 1846, National Archives, Record Group 46, Letterbook 3:192.

⁸ Charles Preuss, *Exploring with Frémont*, trans. and ed. by Erwin G. and Elisabeth K. Gudde (Norman, Okla., 1958).

⁹ See the correspondence in Secretary Asbury Dickins' letterbooks, as cited in note 7, Letterbook 3:183, 191, 192.

Again Preuss sticks pretty much to the trail and inserts little information that he and Frémont had not gained in the field. The scale of ten miles to the inch, or approximately 250 miles per sheet, permitted much more detail than that on the 1845 map, and the many excerpts from Frémont's journals made the whole compilation the early equivalent of a modern road atlas. It hardly serves this purpose today, but it was never far from my reach when I traveled the same route in preparation for this study. Especially helpful were the actual route of Frémont's 1843 trip to the Oregon country and the approximate locations of campsites.

MAP 5

This map has never excited me in the way that earlier Frémont-Preuss productions have, though I recognize it as an important advance in western U.S. cartography. The time for field work, for note-taking and sketching under wretched conditions, had given way to the next logical process: compilation of past observations, including those of the "best authorities." It was time to start filling in the white spaces by relying upon the researches of others as well as one's own.

We shall have another opportunity to comment upon this map when we publish the report which accompanied it, Frémont's *Geographical Memoir upon Upper California* (1848), which probably will appear in our Vol. 3. In the meantime, readers fortunate enough to have access to the limited editions of the Book Club of California may find the *Memoir*, the map, and learned analyses by Allan Nevins and Dale L. Morgan in a reprint with the same title (San Francisco, 1964). I think it unlikely that we can improve upon the Nevins-Morgan work.

The hand of Senator Thomas Hart Benton shows strongly in the production of this map. The *National Intelligencer* of 14 May 1847 reported on plans of the Senate to sponsor the project, and at that time there were two maps under consideration—one of the Rockies and another of the Pacific region. According to the *Intelligencer*, which seemed to be getting its information from Benton, Charles Preuss was to do the compilation from notes on hand, plus additions which Frémont's third expedition might have produced. Benton was quoted as lauding his son-in-

law, pointing out that Frémont had applied for no copyright and had labored in the interest of science disinterestedly and enthusiastically.

On Benton's motion, the Senate resolved 5 June 1848 that Secretary Dickins be authorized to contract for lithographing and printing 20,000 copies of the *Memoir* and the map (*National Intelligencer*, 6 June 1848). The House produced its own edition in 1849. Soon thereafter, the Senate directed its secretary to pay Frémont "for his labor and services since he left the army of the United States, in preparing and compiling the map of Oregon and California . . . and in drawing up a geographical memoir in illustration of said map" (*National Intelligencer*, 20 July 1848). His rate of pay was not to exceed that paid to J. N. Nicollet for his services in compiling the map of the Upper Mississippi.

Let me waver just once in my determination not to attempt a detailed analysis of this map. By virtue of a brief phrase, engraved twice on the map and most difficult to read without a hand lens, the map becomes the first to show, to a widespread readership, the region of the new gold strike in California. In the vicinity of Nueva Helvetia, on the Rio de los Americanos and the upper course of the Rio de las Plumas, appear the words "El Dorado or Gold Region."

When the map first appeared with these words, suspicion grew that Frémont had mounted his ill-fated 1848-49 expedition to California in the full knowledge that gold had been found. Senator Benton, in what appears to be a perfectly true account of the matter, answered the charge in 1849: "In answer to your inquiry I have to say that it is totally false that Mr. Fremont knew anything about the gold mines of the Sacramento, or that he went back with any view to work them. He had started back [to California] before the first news of them came to the United States. . . . The gold region was marked on his map from information brought in by Lt. [Edward F.] Beale, of the Navy, after he was gone."¹⁰

¹⁰ Benton to an unknown correspondent, 28 Jan. 1849, New-York Historical Society.



