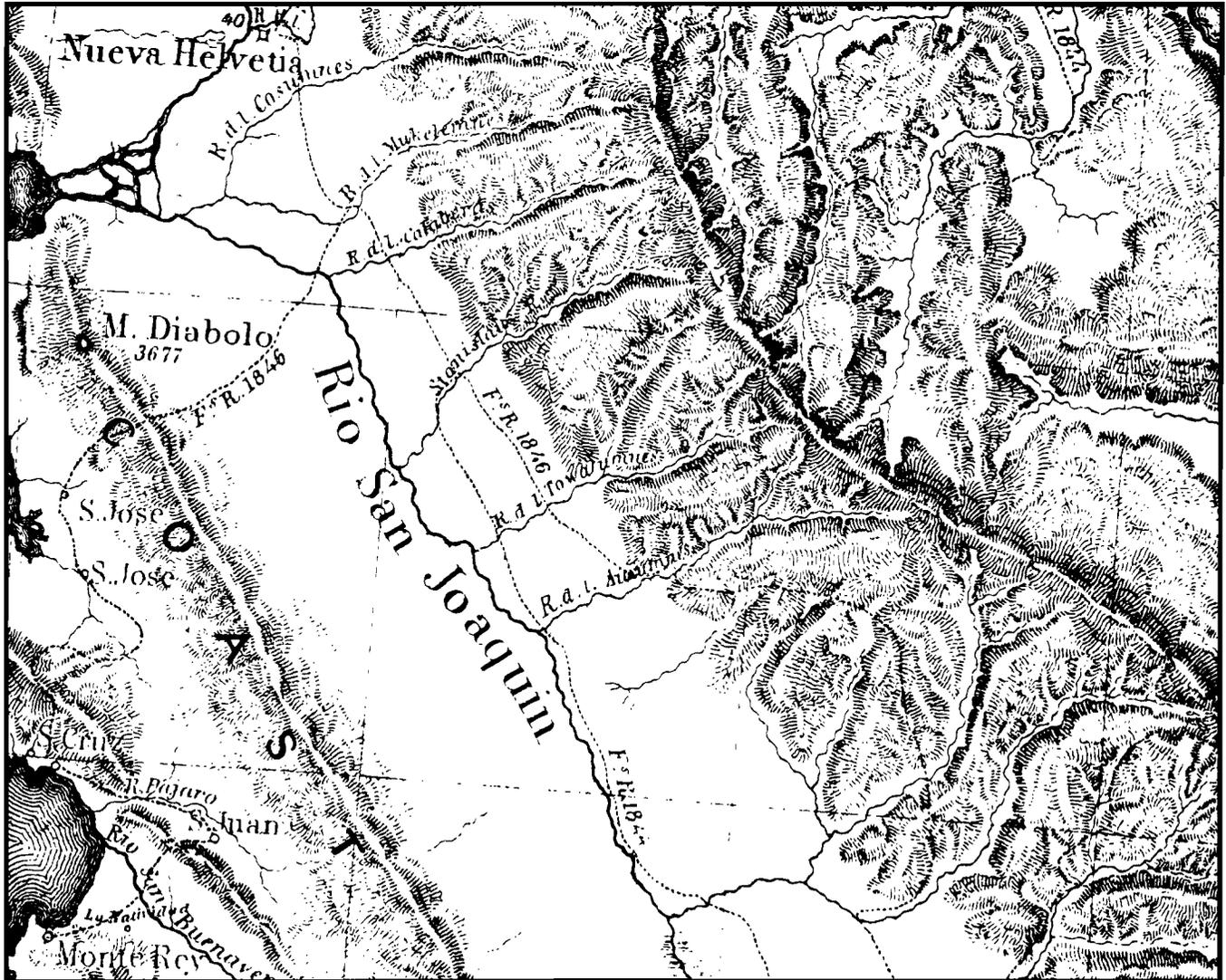


The San Joaquin Historian

RETRACING FRÉMONT'S TRAIL THROUGH SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY IN MARCH 1844



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**Retracing Fremont's Trail Through
San Joaquin County in March 1844**

This issue's text may well be the first published by the *Historian* to have two authors. Certainly it is the first to have been co-authored by a surveyor and an historian. Although the two authors traveled Frémont's route together, they typed separate reports. We have printed Olive Davis' observations in italics so that the reader will have no difficulty understanding which author is holding forth at any given time. On the cover of this issue is a portion of the map published following Fremont's 1846 expedition.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stephen Thumlert is an engineer employed by Siegfried Engineering of Stockton.

Olive Davis is a longtime San Joaquin County historian. She is best known for her monographs *Stockton: Sunrise Port on the San Joaquin* (1984) and *From the Ohio to the San Joaquin: A Biography of William S. Moss, 1798-1883* (1991)

This project began when I heard Stephen Thumlert of Siegfried Engineering give a talk on the Global Positioning Satellite System (GPS). We learned that with survey caliber instruments you could determine your location to within less than 1 centimeter and that even with inexpensive hand-held units you could obtain results within 10 meters or less. When Thumlert had finished his interesting talk, I asked if he could find the locations of latitudes and longitudes determined in 1844. He said, "Yes," and so I provided the readings of John Charles Frémont's 1844 expedition through this county and we agreed to locate "the Pathfinder's" campsites.

I read Frémont's report to Congress. I contacted the military history section of the National Archives and the map division of the Library of Congress in hope of finding field notes of the expedition to support the published readings. These could not be located, so we gathered available publications on the subject and read them. Steve found that four of Frémont's published longitudes and one latitude were in conflict with his narratives for the designated days. We located and

visited various sites and took pictures. The results of our investigation follow.

In 1842, U.S. Army Engineer Frémont, son-in-law of western expansionist Senator Thomas Hart Benton, was commissioned to lead a mapping expedition along the Oregon Trail to the West Coast. The young Pathfinder's report of this expedition, written in a highly readable narrative style, was widely published in newspapers of the day and contributed greatly to Frémont's reputation and to popular enthusiasm for Western exploration.

The maps from Frémont's first and subsequent expeditions were drawn by German-born cartographer and artist, Charles Preuss, whose work became the basis for all western maps for the next 20 years.

In 1843, the government commissioned Frémont to map regions west of the Rocky Mountains. It was during this Second Expedition that he first passed through our area. Frémont's party, consisting of thirty-nine men, twelve two-mule supply carts and a well-sprung instrument wagon, left Kansas Landing on the Missouri River on May 29, 1843. Near St. Louis, the

Pathfinder's friend, Christopher "Kit" Carson, joined the party as a scout.

The group arrived at Fort Vancouver on November 6th and then traveled south along the eastern edge of the Cascade and Sierra Ranges reaching Pyramid Lake on January 12, 1844 and continuing southeasterly until the 25th of January, where their latitude observation told them that they were just south of due east of Sutter's Fort.

Here, Frémont decided to cross the Sierras to New Helvetia, anticipating that Sutter would furnish his party with supplies for the remainder of their journey. The expedition crossed the mountains, reaching Sutter's Fort on March 10, 1844. Here they rested for 12 days enjoying many meals of the local salmon until, refreshed and re-supplied, the party set out with 130 horses and mules and 30 head of cattle in a southeasterly direction toward "the pass at the head of the San Joaquin".

While crossing present-day San Joaquin County Frémont's party camped on the north bank of the Mokelumne River on March 25th, on the north bank of the Calaveras River March 26th and along the north bank of the Stanislaus River from March 27th to the 31st. It is

this portion of his expedition that we have attempted to retrace.

After reading much of Frémont's report to Congress and other available source material we had the following data to work with: 1) narrative reports and descriptions by Fremont and Preuss; 2) a table of mileage between camps; 3) previous work by other modern researchers; 4) a sense of the challenges that Fremont faced daily due to the weather, lack of supplies and the low morale of his party, and 5) the latitudes and longitudes of their camps as recorded : March 25 (lat.) 38° 08' 23," (long.) 121° 23' 03" [Mokelumne]; March 26 (lat.) 38° 02' 48," (long.) 121° 16' 22' [Calaveras]; March 28 (lat.) 37° 42' 26," (long.) 121° 07' 13" [Stanislaus]; March 31 (lat.) 37° 15' 43," (long.) 120° 46' 30" [Stanislaus].

Frémont was charged with surveying and mapping his entire route. To this end he made daily astronomical and meteorological readings and from these he and Charles Preuss calculated the latitudes, longitudes and elevations from which they later compiled the expedition's maps. This data was supplemented with notes taken by both men and by Preuss's drawings.

A partial list of the equipment they carried includes: one 150x refracting telescope by Frauenhofer; one reflecting circle by Gambey; two sextants by Troughton; one pocket chronometer, No. 837 by Goffe, Falmouth; one pocket chronometer, No. 739 by Brockbank; one syphon barometer by Bunten, Paris; one cistern barometer by Frye & Shaw, New York; six thermometers; and, a number of small compasses.

Upon completion of my research and reading, I had plotted Frémont's locations on 7 1/2' U.S.G.S. topographical map sheets. The plotted positions did not fit Frémont's narrative, falling too far west and lying south of their respective rivers. In fact, the location noted for March 31st falls some 36 miles south of the Stanislaus River in Merced County. We know that the determination of latitudes in Frémont's time was fairly accurate but that longitudinal values could vary widely. We know that he observed the sun, the moon, Polaris (the North Star), and the Moons of Jupiter, and that he carried with him both American and English Nautical Almanacs containing all of the tables needed to calculate or

"to reduce" his astronomical observations to latitudes and longitudes through long and tedious calculations. Indeed, Preuss notes frequently in his journal that he was up through the early hours of the morning reducing field notes. The sextants Frémont carried had an index error of +/- 10 seconds of arc, which amounts to a distance error of about +/- 1,000 feet at our latitude, while his chronometers required constant attention to prevent their stopping, gaining or losing time. They could be reset and checked by observing our moon and the moons of Jupiter and then applying these observations to the predictions in the tables of the almanacs. Their rate of gain or loss was also tracked.

With the exception of Frémont's March 31st location we know that his latitude calculations are accurate. The March 31st latitude is an error. It could be a mistake in calculation or more likely an error made at printing. The Pathfinder's determination of longitude is another matter. It is most important in determining longitude to have accurate time, both local and Greenwich. Frémont used two large ship's chronometers on his first expedition. Placing these

delicate instruments in a bouncing wagon did not work. Both chronometers were totally out of service before long. On this second expedition, thinking they would hold up better, he took two pocket chronometers. These devices lasted throughout the trip but demanded constant attention. They were of a type that required lubrication. This lubricant was highly viscous in warmer temperatures but in colder weather it solidified to the point where the chronometers would stop. While some of Fremont's longitudinal observations have proven to be accurate, many of

them have been shown to be miles east or west of the actual point of observation. Keeping track of the "health" of the chronometers and calculating for longitude were both tedious tasks and tedium is conducive to the introduction of error. For additional information on Fremont's determination of longitude the reader is referred to an article by Bob Graham at www.longcamp.com/coord.html. Our technique for determining the location of the observations was to extend the line of known latitude to a point where it crossed the designated river. We then



Campsite north of Mokelumne River (March 25, 1844)

visited this spot and compared it to the narrative and to the other resources we gathered. From this we drew our conclusions.

Along the Mokelumne River, the latitude reading falls on the south bank of the Mokelumne approximately 2 miles east of Highway State Route 99 at a longitude of $121^{\circ} 13' 30''$. Allowing for the index error of his sextant, Frémont's camp could fall on the north bank of the Mokelumne, agreeing with the narrative. A reading taken with a hand held GPS Unit places the camp approximately 9 miles east of the point

designated in Fremont's report to Congress. His map indicates that from the site of his observation he went N.E. along the River and crossed at a ford.

We believe this ford to have been east of present-day Tretheway Road and west of the Elliott Road that proceeds north out of Lockeford. This ford is thought to have existed in 1844 on the road between French Camp and New Helvetia. We visited the possible location near an area the Locke family calls "Wilson's Bend." This place originally had low sloping banks and a shallow bottom. There is still a small



Mokelumne River ford
(March 26, 1844)



Near campsite north of Calaveras River (March 26, 1844)

island in the stream, although the river is eating its north bank and the south bank has been reinforced.

From the crossing of the Mokelumne, Frémont proceeded south approximately eight miles to cross the Calaveras just west of present-day Highway 88. His line of latitude crosses the Calaveras at $121^{\circ} 11' 40''$. This crossing point lies approximately 4 miles east of the longitude recorded in the Pathfinder's report.

Frémont wrote: "Halted at the Arroyo de las Calaveras...This place is beautiful with groves of oak and grassy sward beneath, with many plants in

bloom some varieties of which seem to love the shade of the trees and grow there in close, small fields." The temperature at sunset was fifty-eight degrees, the weather was calm and the sky was nearly clear.

Camping was a many-layered process involving all members of the Frémont party and their livestock. The first job was to relieve the half-wild mules of their heavy packs. Some riding horses were unsaddled, watered and tethered for the night, while others were used by those who watched the cattle. Still other party members gathered wood and established cook fires. Each

campfire was base for five or six of the crew. Perhaps someone shot a deer or a wild goose which, as Frémont notes, "walked around in the fields as if tame." After supper Frémont or Preuss recorded the meteorological observations for the day.

The next day (March 27th) the expedition proceeded approximately twenty-four miles in a southeasterly direction until it came upon the Stanislaus River. Unable to cross because the river was flowing fast and deep and was approximately 50 yards wide, Frémont led his party five miles upstream and camped.

The Pathfinder wrote of this day's journey: "during the earlier part of the day our ride had been over the very level prairie or rather a succession of long stretches of prairie separated by lines of groves of oak-timber growing along the dry gullies which are filled with water in season of rain. Over much of this extent the vegetation was sparse, the surface showing plainly the action of water in the season flood. The Joaquin spreads over the valley." The source of this flooding might actually have been the Calaveras River, which, in wet years, flooded everything between its south bank and Mormon Slough.



Campsite north of Stanislaus River (March 27, 1844)

“About one o’clock we came again among innumerable flowers and a few miles farther, a field of beautiful blue-flowering lupine, which seems to love the neighborhood of water, indicated that we were approaching a stream. We here found this beautiful shrub in thickets, some of them being 12ft. in height. Occasionally three or four plants were clustered together, formed a grand bouquet about 90 feet in circumference and 10 feet high, the whole summit covered with spikes of flowers, the perfume of which is very grateful.” I once saw some of these wild perennial lupines growing near the spot where the railroad tracks cross the Stanislaus River.

[We] “turned east and traveled five miles up the river and encamped without being able to find a ford. Made a large corral, in order to be able to catch a sufficient number of our wild animals to relieve those previously packed.” The men might have done this by clearing the underbrush in a circle with an opening to the water. Here, they took no latitude or longitude readings, but we determined the site to be near the present-day McHenry Avenue Recreation Area on River Road.

The next morning (March 28th) Frémont traveled seventeen miles downstream and again pitched camp and took latitude and longitude readings. His latitude crosses the Stanislaus at two points approximately 0.8 miles apart. Based upon Frémont’s narrative and the mileage he provides for the party’s travel along the Stanislaus, we think they probably camped near the more westerly of the two points on the north side of the northerly bend in the river. This point has a longitude of 121° 10’ 40” and lies just east of Caswell Park approximately three miles east of his reported reading.

From this camp Frémont proceeded some eight miles downstream where he found a suitable crossing near the river’s mouth. The party camped here and took readings, noting their latitude as 37° 15’ 43”. This figure is incorrect since it actually falls approximately thirty-six miles to the south in present-day Merced County.

Fremont wrote: “Camped in a handsome oak grove and killed several cattle to skin and use the hides to ferry baggage across the river.” Charles Preuss, Fremont’s assistant, whose detailed letters to his family provide a first-hand account of much of the

expedition wrote: "It is true that this valley is a paradise, grass, flowers, trees, beautiful clear rivers, thousands of deer, elk, wild horses and wonderful salmon. I shall probably settle on Captain Sutter's property."

Frémont's party may have started moving baggage and livestock across the Stanislaus River on March 30th because Preuss noted on that day that they had lost thirteen head of cattle at the crossing. He wrote that he was "quite worried about Alex Godey" (a Delaware Indian and the official hunter of the party) adding that "since he had to cross the river with the horses, he had started the pursuit of the cattle entirely nude. He did not return until late at night, with the report that we are not likely to get them back. These animals are almost as wild as buffalo; without the half-tamed cows we should hardly be able to make them move along."

The party completed its crossing of the Stanislaus on April 1st and traveled ten miles to what Frémont calls, both in his narrative and on the expedition map, the "Rio de la Merced." The Pathfinder took no readings here but by using the mileage noted in his report (ten miles beyond the Stanislaus) this

new river can only be the Tuolumne. Frémont's next observations (April 3rd) were taken twenty-two miles later, at "a large tributary of the San Joaquin" the reported latitude of which was comparable to that of the Merced River.

While I don't think that we can ever pinpoint exactly Frémont's route through our area, I believe that we have come close. Frémont and his comrades saw a great deal of our region in a short time. From their descriptions of what they encountered the men found it a sort of paradise. The stories they told when they returned to the east must have been as hard to believe as today it is hard to imagine that where there is now farming, industry and tract housing there once were lush grasslands, fields of tall lupine, clear rivers and wildlife so profuse that it seemed tame.

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