Manifest Destinies

AMERICA'S WESTWARD EXPANSION AND
THE ROAD TO THE CIVIL WAR

Steven E. Woodworth

Alfred A. Knopf • New York • 2010
CHAPTER FOUR

The Oregon Trail

Since the first English colonists arrived in North America, the opportunity to find new land and a new start, economically and perhaps socially, just beyond the western horizon had been important to Americans. The westward march of settlement had seemed as inexorable as the progress of an alpine glacier down a mountain valley, but instead of ice this was a river of people, each seeking a new start on new land—one farm just west of the last, a new village springing up on the next likely-looking riverside bluff or at the fording of the next stream by a rude frontier trail. So the frontier had crept westward to the Mississippi during the first four decades after independence, crossed the Father of Waters without skipping a beat, and reached the western portions of Missouri and the eastern regions of Iowa by the 1830s.1

West of Missouri and Iowa lay the Great Plains, which an army exploratory expedition in the 1820s had labeled the Great American Desert. Beyond the plains were the Rockies, and beyond them—and even a real desert or two—lay the well-watered Pacific slope of the continent, but it had long seemed out of reach. British and American ships had visited a coast they called Oregon since the late eighteenth century and engaged in fur trade with the Indians there. Lewis and Clark reached that coast by land in 1805, having crossed the continent from the Mississippi in the preceding nineteen months, but their experience could have created no illusions that the trip to the Pacific coast would be an easy one. The expedition had been an epic journey for a military party of hand-picked soldiers and guides. It was hard to see how the course of commerce could ever take the route across the interior of the North American continent.2

In the three decades that followed, American trappers roved the Far West, but no settlers. As with the first colonization of America's eastern coast, when commercial interests no longer sufficed to propel settlers into new territory, religious motives provided the additional drive. In the case
of Oregon, religious motivation entered the story in a roundabout way and played the role of initial catalyst.

In 1831 several northwestern Indians arrived in St. Louis with the returning annual fur-trading caravan. They had been curious about the white man's country, and while in St. Louis they enjoyed the hospitality of U.S. Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Clark, who had visited their homeland in Oregon a quarter century before. Also in St. Louis that fall was a visiting member of the Wyandot tribe from the East, an educated man named William Walker. Walker apparently did not meet the northwestern Indians while they were in town, but a little more than a year later, in January 1833, he wrote an account of their visit to G. P. Disosway, an Indian agent to the Wyandots in Ohio. In this account, Walker related that the northwestern Indians had asked that the white man's "Book of Heaven" be sent to them, along with suitable instructors. Perhaps Walker had heard second-hand reports of the Indians' discussions with Clark, or perhaps he wrote what he thought they should have said. In any case, Disosway believed him and forwarded his letter to a Methodist periodical called the Christian Advocate and Journal, which published it in March 1833.3

The letter was a powerful appeal for the large segment of the American population who were devout evangelical Christians. A number of men began preparing to go to Oregon as missionaries. One of the first to step forward was thirty-year-old Methodist pastor and schoolteacher Jason Lee. Lee traveled the overland route with an expedition of American fur traders, and on the advice of officials of the British Hudson's Bay Company in Oregon, he established his mission in the Willamette Valley.4

More missionaries followed, among them Marcus Whitman. Whitman, a physician, visited Oregon in 1835 and on the way made a reputation for himself by successfully removing from the back of the famous mountain man Jim Bridger an arrowhead that had been embedded there for three years. Late that summer Whitman returned to the East to gather helpers for mission work in Oregon. One of them, Narcissa Prentiss, he married. Marcus and Narcissa, along with their friends and fellow Presbyterian missionaries Henry and Eliza Spalding, then prepared for the journey to Oregon, now under the auspices of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.5

The Whitmans planted their mission station in eastern Oregon at Waiilatpu, just west of modern-day Walla Walla, Washington, to minister to the Cayuse. Narcissa and Eliza were the first white women to cross the Rockies, and their letters home, along with those of other missionaries, including several missionary wives who arrived a short time later, painted an enticing picture of a lush green land of fertile soil and mild climate in the Willamette Valley and, perhaps more important, related accounts of a cross-country journey that, though strenuous, was possible even for families. "It is astonishing how well we get along with our wagons where there are no roads," wrote Narcissa Whitman from the plains during their crossing. "I think I may say it is easier traveling here than on any turnpike in the States."6

Thus, from missionaries as well as from businessmen and fur traders, knowledge of the Oregon Country grew, and with it grew interest, as the territory on the Pacific slope became the focus of the nation's well-developed westering habit. The steady pressure of American westward expansion had briefly gathered itself behind the barrier of the Great Plains, and now it was about to burst out with a surge unlike any that had gone before.

Officially, the Oregon Country comprised that part of the North American continent lying west of the crest of the Rockies, north of the northern boundary of Mexican California (latitude 42° north), and south of the southern tip of Russian Alaska (latitude 54°30' north). Those boundaries encompassed all of the modern-day Canadian province of British Columbia and the U.S. states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, as well as small parts of Wyoming and Montana. The United States claimed the area because of an American sea captain's 1792 discovery of the mouth of the Columbia River and because of Lewis and Clark's 1805 arrival in the territory. The British staked their claim on the presence of their Hudson's Bay Company's trading posts in the region, especially the one at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia. Spain and Russia had also once made vague claims to the region, but Spain had renounced its interest in 1819, and Russia had done the same in 1824 and 1825. Meanwhile, in 1818 Britain and the United States had reached an agreement by which the two nations would exercise "joint occupancy" of the Oregon Country, but that arrangement clearly could last only as long as the region remained largely unoccupied. As soon as people began flowing into Oregon, the question of its ownership would come due.7

Among the first Americans to take up the implied challenge and set out with the specific purpose of wresting Oregon away from the British was a group of seventeen men from Peoria, Illinois. In the fall of 1838
Jason Lee made a speaking tour in the East, and his descriptions of Oregon fired many an imagination. One of his stops was the Main Street Presbyterian Church of Peoria, where he spoke on September 30. Five boys belonging to the Calapooya (or Kalapuya) tribe were traveling with Lee, and one of them took ill in Peoria and had to stay there several weeks to recover. Lee’s lecture was powerful, and over the weeks that followed the young man told glowing tales of his homeland, where the Columbia River teemed with salmon. Several local men began to take an interest.

Under the encouragement of a thirty-five-year-old Peoria lawyer named Thomas J. Farnham, they organized themselves as the Oregon Dragoons and elected Farnham as their leader. Over the winter Farnham’s wife sewed them a flag bearing the motto “Oregon or the Grave,” and the following May they set out, proudly bearing their new banner. The Oregon Dragoons, often called the Peoria Party, were part of the filibustering tradition that had over the previous three decades prompted small groups of Americans to venture on equally quixotic private expeditions into Spanish or Mexican territories with the goal of winning those lands for the United States. The stated purpose of the Peoria Party was to drive British fur traders out of the Oregon Country and secure it for the United States. Then they hoped to pickle and ship a great deal of salmon.

After gathering on Peoria’s courthouse square on May 1, 1839, and solemnly pledging to stand by one another come what may, the seventeen Oregon Dragoons, who ranged in age from those in their early twenties to a man of fifty-four, started off on their journey, cheered by their townsmen and following their “Oregon or the Grave” flag.

The Oregon Dragoons planned to follow the by now tried and proven route across the continent blazed by the fur-trading caravans. That route started near Independence, Missouri, on the Missouri River, and from there led across the Kansas prairie to the Platte River in what is today Nebraska, then along the banks of the Platte to its forks in the western part of the state, up the North Platte into central Wyoming, southwest along the valley of the Sweetwater River, across the Continental Divide via the remarkably gentle South Pass, down the valley of the Snake River to the Columbia, and down the valley of the Columbia to the Willamette River. The route, which came to be known as the Oregon Trail, balanced directness with easy travel.

The journey west did not turn out to be an easy trip for the Peorians. After three weeks of travel and almost incessant bickering among themselves, the Dragoons reached Independence. There the mountain man Andrew Sublette advised them to follow the Santa Fe Trail instead of the more direct route to Oregon. Used by traders carrying goods from the Missouri River to sell in New Mexico, the Santa Fe Trail angled southwest. It may be that Sublette reckoned the more heavily traveled Santa Fe Trail was a more appropriate route for such a bunch of obvious greenhorns, who he might have hoped would turn back before they got themselves into trouble. At any rate, Farnham planned to follow the Santa Fe Trail to what is now eastern Colorado, then cut north and pick up the Oregon Trail somewhere in present-day Utah.

The Peoria Party struck out over the seemingly endless plains, traveling day after day across the gently rolling grasslands under an enormous sky that reminded a man just how small he was. Like many travelers who came before and after, they were astonished by the violence and majesty of Great Plains thunderstorms. “Peal upon peal of thunder rolled around, and up and down the heavens,” wrote Farnham of a storm that struck their camp one night, “and the burning bolts appeared to leap from cloud to cloud and from heaven to earth, in such fearful rapidity, that the lurid glare of one had scarcely fallen on the sight, when another of still greater intensity.” The animals huddled together in terror, and neither whip nor spur could move them. “Hail and rain came down in torrents,” Farnham recalled, and the almost constant flashes of lightning revealed broad sheets of water forming across the lower places of the prairie.

The heavy rains during the journey across the Kansas and Nebraska prairies made camping miserable and traveling a continual struggle with mud and swollen streams. Food supplies ran low. Farnham had counted on the party shooting enough game to feed itself along the way, but game was scarce at first, and the men’s flintlock rifles would not work properly in the wet weather. They had to go on short rations—a quarter cup of flour per day. They mixed the flour with water, of which they had no shortage, fried up the batter in bacon fat, and choked down the resulting johnnycakes as best they could. Three members of the party quit and turned back. The Dragoons eventually reached lands where buffalo were thick, sometimes so thick the party could hardly move forward through the dense herd. By this time their flour was gone, and they had nothing but meat to eat.

All the while they quarreled among themselves, the disputes becoming increasingly intense. One day two of the more hot-tempered members were arguing in their tent when one of them became so enraged that
he grabbed for his rifle but took it by the muzzle. The hammer caught on the fabric of the tent, and the gun went off, badly wounding its owner in the side. Since the party had brought no medical supplies, they had to borrow some, along with a wagon to carry the wounded man, from a passing train of Santa Fe traders. Thereafter, they made slower progress, and their bickering became so intense that they voted to depose Farnham and elect another man as their leader. Meanwhile, Sioux raiders stole two of their horses, and three more members of the Oregon Dragoons decided to leave the group and set out on their own.

On July 5 the party reached Bent’s Fort, a private trading post set up by the fur traders Charles and William Bent in what is today eastern Colorado. There the strife among the Peorians came to a head, and they voted Farnham and two others, including the wounded man, out of the party. Two more chose to join Farnham’s faction. The two separate groups continued on toward Oregon, eventually further disintegrating into ones and twos and one large group of four men. They faced snow, ice, and periods of near starvation. One group was happy to purchase and eat two dogs from the Indians.

Eventually nine of the men made it to Oregon, though as ordinary settlers rather than would-be conquerors. Those who did make Oregon were thin from starvation and hardship and sported shaggy hair and beards and ragged clothes. Their grueling journey across the continent hardly seemed to predict any significant future American migration in that direction. Nonetheless, when Farnham visited the mission stations and associated settlements in Oregon, sixty-seven U.S. citizens asked him to use his legal training to help them draw up a petition, which they then asked him to take to Washington, begging the United States government to exercise sovereignty and protect the rights of Americans in the region.

By the time Farnham and his fellow Peorians reached Oregon in late 1839, at least ten different towns back in the Mississippi Valley had “Oregon Societies,” dedicated not to conquering Oregon but to settling it. Ownership would follow settlement. And despite the hardships of the journey, a handful of other Americans made their way to Oregon in the late 1830s and early 1840s. These included another forty Methodist missionaries who traveled to Oregon by ship, led by Jason Lee on his return journey after a visit to the East. Others came the hard way, across the continent.

Appeals continued to come from Oregon settlers to the U.S. government to provide them with some oversight. They resented the local influence of the Hudson’s Bay Company, which they believed overcharged them for supplies and provisions. Of course, with no competition, the Hudson’s Bay Company price was the real market value. Still, the settlers wished for some U.S. governmental presence in the territory. Indeed, carrying a petition from the settlers to the government in Washington, D.C., was the chief errand that had brought Jason Lee east in 1838. Other appeals followed.

President Tyler was an enthusiastic advocate of the westward expansion of the United States. In his first formal address to Congress, in the summer of 1841, he had written in glowing terms of the glories and benefits of territorial growth and had hinted that the United States was destined to spread all the way to the Pacific. He saw this growth as an expansion of an empire of liberty, providing sufficient room to offer freedom to the oppressed peoples of Europe. “We hold out to the people of other countries an invitation to come and settle among us as members of our rapidly growing family,” he had written, “and for the blessings which we offer them we require of them to look upon our country as their country and to unite with us in the great task of preserving our institutions and thereby perpetuating our liberties.”

Eager as he may have been to add Oregon to the domain of free and orderly government provided by the United States Constitution, Tyler had to tread lightly in responding to the requests of Americans there for a U.S. government presence lest it upset the arrangement with England. This was especially undesirable given that the two countries were in the midst of negotiating what would become the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, fixing the U.S.-Canadian boundary east of the Rockies. Nonetheless, with the strong encouragement of expansion-minded senators, Tyler could and did take some modest steps toward facilitating the flow of American settlers into Oregon. One step was to explore the route, at least as far as the Continental Divide, and so he ordered the army to send a small expedition to scout the Oregon Trail as far as South Pass. The commander of the expedition was Lieutenant John C. Frémont of the U.S. Army’s Corps of Topographical Engineers.

Born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1819, Frémont had received his army commission in 1838 after attending the College of Charleston and serving as a civilian mathematics instructor to midshipmen on a U.S. Navy warship. In 1841, the twenty-eight-year-old Frémont had significantly enhanced his career prospects by wooing, winning, and wedding the seventeen-year-old favorite daughter of the powerful Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton. It could have been a disaster for Frémont, since
the senator at first was enraged that Frémont had eloped with his daughter, Jessie, but Benton's wrath proved transient, and he soon became a booster of his son-in-law's career. 19

After learning the trade of a topographical engineer under the tutelage of Joseph Nicollet in explorations of the upper Mississippi Valley, Frémont, with Benton's powerful support, won the assignment to lead the expedition to South Pass. While in St. Louis that summer preparing for the expedition and looking for a guide, Frémont had chanced to encounter the mountain man Kit Carson on a Missouri River steamboat. He hired Carson on the spot, and the doughty frontiersman became the mainstay of all Frémont's explorations from that day forth. Frémont, with Carson and twenty-two other members of the expedition, set out from Chouteau's Landing, where the Kansas River joined the Missouri, on June 10. 20

A man who met Frémont just before he left Washington for his expedition described him as "about the medium height, spare of flesh, but strong in bone and muscle; hair black and parted in the center, falling careless in folds over his large head to the shoulders; eyes and eyebrows black, complexion dark and swarthy, large square forehead, wide mouth." Most people found the young officer striking. Some considered him a man of destiny, and none held that opinion more strongly than did John C. Frémont himself. 21

While Frémont led the expedition to scout the Oregon Trail, Tyler, urged on by both of Missouri's senators, made other arrangements to extend U.S. influence into the territory itself. The British were already exercising an indirect government interest there through the Hudson's Bay Company. Tyler decided to counter by appointing a sub-Indian agent, a fairly low-ranking official. The man he selected was Elijah White, a physician. It was perhaps not the most judicious selection. White had traveled to Oregon by sea and joined Jason Lee at his Willamette Valley mission. In 1841, under suspicion of immoral conduct, White had left Oregon and by another sea voyage returned to the States. Still, men who had been to Oregon, even by ship, were not all that common in Washington, and Tyler did not have many from which to choose. In appointing White, Tyler also encouraged him to take as many emigrants with him as he could when he went back to Oregon, this time overland. 22

By May 14, 1842, the industrious White had collected eighteen wagons, with 112 emigrants, of whom 52 were adult men, all set to accompany him on his trek to Oregon to become sub-Indian agent there.

Economic pressures had begun to augment the lure of Oregon and the call of religious duty as motivations for heading west. Hard times had lingered after the Panic of 1837, prompting some farmers in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys to look to greener fields in Oregon. They were eager to take advantage of White's supposed familiarity with the trail to guide them through the nineteen hundred miles of wilderness that lay between them and their new farms. Indeed, some five hundred people had expressed their intention of joining White's party, but most had been unable to sell their farms in the depressed real-estate market of the time. 23

Those who joined White's party formed the first organized wagon train to set out with the specific purpose of establishing new homes in Oregon. The party's wagons rolled out of Independence, Missouri, on May 16, 1842, almost a full month ahead of Frémont's party. Their trip west was much easier than that of the Peoria Party three years before, but not without its difficulties. They followed the main Oregon Trail and made good time, but bickering broke out when White decreed that all the party's dogs should be killed at once so as to prevent noise that might give away their position to the Indians, or perhaps to avoid a plague of rabies—accounts differ. Twenty-two dogs were killed and matters had reached a complete impasse, with the remaining dog owners ready for violence, before White and his supporters finally backed down and repealed the odious decree of canicide. 24

Along the Platte River the wagon train encountered great herds of bison. "No adequate conception can be formed of the immensity of the numerous herds, which here abound," wrote one of the travelers. "The entire plains and prairies are densely covered and completely blackened with them, as far as the most acute vision extends." The wagon train halted for a few days to feast on the finest cuts of buffalo meat. "I think I can truly say I saw in that region in one day more buffaloes than I have seen of cattle in all my life," wrote another of the emigrants. "They seemed to be coming northward continually from the distant plains to the Platte to get water and would plunge in and swim across by the thousands." The vast herd splashing through the river "changed not only the color of the water, but its taste, until it was unfit to drink; but we had to use it," recalled the pioneer ruefully. "We could hear them thundering all night long. The ground fairly trembled with vast approaching bands, and if they had not been diverted, wagons, animals, and emigrants would have been trodden under their feet." The men kept up bonfires around
the camp at night and periodically fired their rifles into the air to ward off the tide of beasts.25

Following a few weeks behind the emigrants, Frémont with his army expedition reached the Platte as well, but Frémont called the river by a form of its Otoe Indian name, Nebraska, from a word meaning “flat water.” It was the first use of the name of the future state in a written document.26

By that time White’s wagon train was moving through the western part of what is today the state of Nebraska, past the stony landmarks of Courthouse Rock and Scotts Bluff. The majority of the emigrants had become seriously dissatisfied with White’s leadership. They held another election and replaced him as captain with a handsome and ambitious twenty-three-year-old guitar maker from Mount Vernon, Ohio, Lansford W. Hastings. White and his followers remained disaffected for a number of days and traveled in a separate group a little ahead of the main wagon train.27

At Fort Laramie, a traders’ stockade on the Laramie River in eastern Wyoming, White hired the mountain man Thomas Fitzpatrick to serve as a guide, paying him with $500 in government funds. This proved such a good decision that it somewhat restored White’s reputation in the wagon train. Hastings remained captain, but a more amiable mood prevailed in the party. While they camped near Fort Laramie, some of the emigrants repaired rickety wagons by cutting them down into carts, while others sold spavined oxen for a pittance and purchased a few supplies and fresh horses. Before they pressed on, trappers warned them that the Sioux, through whose range they were about to pass, were in a surly mood.28

Mid-July found the wagon train in central Wyoming, toiling along the valley of the Sweetwater River, near which they encountered the 120-foot-high exposed granite pluton that a group of trappers had named Independence Rock some years before after celebrating the Fourth of July there. Hastings and his second-in-command, Asa Lovejoy, decided to ride away from the train and carve their names in the tough granite, confident that two men on horseback could easily overtake the plodding oxen after they finished their sightseeing.29

The train had proceeded several miles, or most of a day’s journey, and was approaching another rock formation, this one called Devil’s Gate, where the Sweetwater River—but not the trail—passed through a narrow cut in a granite ridge, when the emigrants were startled from their contemplation of the rocks by the approach of a large party of Sioux. To the amazement of the whites, the Sioux were bringing in Hastings and Lovejoy. The two had had quite an unpleasant day, having been captured that morning and treated roughly until they had managed to convince the Indians, through the interpretation of one of them who spoke English, that the wagon train was not, in fact, on its way to join the tribe’s enemies, the Blackfoot. Finally, with apparent reluctance on the part of
some in the band, the Indians decided to return the two men to the wagon train, along with most of their property—horses, guns, saddles, and bridles—in exchange for some tobacco.  

Throughout the rest of the journey along the Sweetwater, relations with the Sioux remained tenuous, and men who roved out from the train to hunt buffalo were often robbed of their meat as well as their horses. A member of the party estimated that at one point he could see several thousand Sioux camped within sight of the wagon train. Fitzpatrick's savvy with Indians was a key factor in preventing an attack and perhaps a massacre. Still traveling several weeks behind the emigrants, Frémont's heavily armed party, including the redoubtable Carson, had serious concerns about proceeding any farther into Sioux country in the present agitated state of the tribe but finally went ahead, thanks in part to Frémont's unquenchable ambition and the skillful guidance of the fur trader Joseph Bissonette.  

The emigrants, as well as Frémont's army explorers, still a couple of weeks behind, reached South Pass without a major clash with the Sioux. The pass itself was so gradual as to be almost disappointing, more of a broad sloping plain than anything that looked like the imagination's picture of a mountain pass. Frémont and Carson actually had to spend some time looking for the summit, and Frémont wrote that the ascent was as gentle as the slope of Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Frémont's report of his explorations along the trail and in the vicinity of South Pass reads very much like a guide to future emigrants, which is exactly what he and his sponsors, Senator Benton and President Tyler, intended it to be. After scouting about in the Wind River Range—that "savage sublimity of naked rock," as he would call it in his report—Frémont headed for home to publish his findings. Frémont's wife, Jessie—Senator Benton's daughter—applied her considerable literary skills to the report, and Frémont himself had a flair for the dramatic. Their collaboration helped build excitement for westward migration and began to establish the reputation that would eventually win for Frémont the sobriquet the Pathfinder.  

By the first of August, Hastings, White, and company had reached the Green River in southwestern Wyoming. Rougher trail lay ahead, the season was getting late, and the party's draft animals were badly fatigued. They needed to make better time, and the only way to do that was to lighten the loads. Prized possessions taken from eastern homes and hauled with much labor across the plains now had to be abandoned beside the trail. The women lamented the loss of feather beds, chairs, dishes, and cooking utensils. The men had to part with items they had hoped to use in Oregon, including even wagons and harnesses. The party's wagons were abandoned, sold at Fort Hall, or else disassembled and the pieces used to build pack saddles so that the teams could haul the necessary supplies on their backs rather than on wheels.  

Thus unencumbered, the party pressed on more rapidly. They made stops of a day or two at the Hudson's Bay Company outposts of Fort Hall, where the last of the wagons were sold, and Fort Boise. Ahead of them loomed the Blue Mountains, and their towering appearance "struck us with terror," wrote emigrant Medorem Crawford. "Their lofty peaks seemed a resting place for clouds." Yet once the party got among them, the mountains proved more of an inconvenience than a threat. Crawford thought the trail through them was "very sicking and uncomfortable rocky." Having safely cleared the mountains before snow flew, the party's next stop was Whittman's mission at Wailatpu; they enjoyed the hospitality of each outpost in turn and took the opportunity to purchase supplies or horses as needed. At Wailatpu they listened with fascination as Whitman preached to the Indians in their own language and with more comprehension as he preached to them and to his family in English.  

From Wailatpu they pressed on another 150 miles to the Methodist mission at The Dalles, where they again rested and refitted for a few days. Resuming their journey, they arrived at the settlements in the Willamette Valley on October 5. One of the participants, looking back on the experience many years later, thought that the last three weeks of travel through Oregon before reaching the Willamette Valley were the hardest part of the entire journey, exhausted as man and beast were by this time. The rest stops at Wailatpu and The Dalles had been much needed.  

Despite the hardship and occasional squabbles, the first organized wagon train had reached Oregon. True, it arrived minus its wagons, but overall the venture had been a splendid success and the harbinger of other expeditions to follow. The settlers found the Willamette Valley all that they had hoped, though their enjoyment of it was sometimes tempered by their annoyance with White, who was soon claiming to hold all government power in Oregon. He turned out to be a petty if more or less benevolent would-be dictator, and people generally ignored him as much as possible. At any rate, one eccentric and power-hungry bureaucrat was not going to stem the coming tide of American immigration to Oregon.  

In February 1843 Marcus Whitman rode into St. Louis, his face and hands scarred by frostbite. He had crossed the continent in the dead of
winter, having left his mission station at Wailiatpu on October 3, just after Hastings's party passed through on its way to the Willamette Valley. With him was the second-in-command of the party—and Hastings's companion in brief captivity to the Sioux—Asa Lovejoy, who had agreed to turn back and accompany Whitman on his winter journey. When they reached Fort Hall, they learned that the Sioux were still as hostile as they had been that summer. To avoid them, Whitman and Lovejoy detoured to the south, following the course of the Bear River. Working their way around the snowbound Uinta Mountains, they picked up a trapper for a guide at a dreary trading post in western Colorado. At Fort Uncompahgre, another trappers' trading post, they exchanged their guide for another, but when a blizzard caught them in the valley of the Gunnison River, their new guide panicked. Whitman left Lovejoy in camp for a week while he took the guide back to Fort Uncompahgre and exchanged him for another; presumably made of sterner stuff.37

The journey became a seemingly endless misery of cold and hunger. To stave off starvation, they ate their dog and one mule. In the mountains of southern Colorado, the fur trader Charles Bent provided them new animals and equipment, and they set off for Bent's Fort, the trading post Bent and his brother William had established on the Arkansas River east of the Rockies. Some miles from the fort, they met William Bent, who informed them that a party of trappers was about to depart for the East. Eager to join them, Whitman decided, for the first time on the trip, that it would be permissible to travel on Sunday, and he pressed on ahead of Lovejoy and their guide to reach the fort before the trappers left. As it turned out, Whitman got lost, and Lovejoy and the guide beat him to the fort, a fact he remorsefully attributed to his wrongdoing in traveling on the Sabbath. A messenger sent galloping ahead bid the trappers wait, and Whitman was able to join them for the final leg of his journey, while the exhausted Lovejoy remained at Bent's Fort until summer.38

Whitman's arrival in St. Louis created a minor sensation, not only because of the amazing feat he had just completed but also because he brought the first news of the Hastings wagon train's safe arrival in Oregon. Whitman was pleased to see the growing enthusiasm for Oregon and the prospects of large-scale migration, but had no desire to tarry in Missouri. He had come east with a purpose—two purposes, actually, which both required him to continue his journey all the way to the Atlantic coast.

One of Whitman's reasons for making his epic winter trek was his concern about the future status of Oregon. He was deeply worried that the Oregon Country was falling further under the sway of the Hudson's Bay Company and thus of the British Crown. The arrival of Hastings's party, along with the overinflated Sub-Indian Agent White, may have given Whitman hope that the territory could be brought into the United States. Part of his purpose in undertaking his winter crossing of the continent seems to have been to encourage more settlers to go to Oregon and to urge the U.S. government to take steps to secure the territory. His first destination on the East Coast was Washington, D.C., where he arrived still sporting his travel-worn buckskins and buffalo robe. There he talked with President Tyler, Secretary of State Daniel Webster, and other members of the cabinet, urging that the federal government take steps to aid and support emigrants bound for Oregon.39

Whitman's other and much more pressing concern involved the future of his mission station at Wailiatpu. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions had decided to close the stations at Wailiatpu and Lapwai, retaining only the one among the Spokane tribe near the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Colville. Mission work among the Indians was discouraging. Their native religions had a strong hold on them, one not easily broken. The wife of a missionary at the Spokane station would write in 1847, "We have been here almost nine years and have not yet been permitted to hear the cries of one penitent or the songs of one redeemed soul." To make matters worse, some of the board's missionaries in the Oregon Country did not get along. Disheartened by this situation, the board had decided early in 1842 that its limited resources could be more profitably invested elsewhere. Elijah White had delivered the board's letter to Whitman when he reached Wailiatpu just ahead of the rest of Hastings's party. Whitman was eager to urge the board to maintain the Wailiatpu and Lapwai stations, and thus he arrived at the board's Boston headquarters on March 30, 1843.

If Whitman thought his winter journey in the mountains had been cold, he found it was nothing compared with the icy reception he received from the dour Presbyterians of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The members were shocked by Whitman's rough-hewn appearance—he wore the same buckskins and buffalo robe he had in the nation's capital—and immediately gave him money to buy a respectable suit of clothes. They were not inclined to give him anything else. They reproached him for having abandoned his post without permission and wasted money on the cross-country journey, and they were not eager to hear his arguments against their decision. Grudgingly they listened and finally agreed to allow the stations at Wailiatpu and
Lapwai a new lease on life. Whitman and the other missionaries would have the board’s permission to stay in the Oregon Country, but they would not have any more of the board’s money. The members even declined to pay the expense of Whitman’s return journey.40

Undaunted, Whitman made plans to travel back to the Oregon Country the following spring, and he let it be known to all and sundry, including the influential New-York Tribune editor Horace Greeley, that he would do what he could to help guide another wagon train through the difficult western part of the journey. He placed notices in newspapers and in a pamphlet that he had printed, not only repeating his offer to guide a wagon train west of Fort Hall but also describing the beauty and desirability of Oregon.41

Whitman’s efforts, along with the news that the previous year’s party had reached Oregon safely, did much to encourage additional emigration, and 1843 saw a migration on a much larger scale than in previous years. In fact, emigrants prepared to go in such numbers as to create a bit of a sensation. “This migration of more than a thousand persons in one body to Oregon,” wrote Greeley, “wears an aspect of insanity.” Greeley may have been particularly well qualified to pronounce on the issue of insanity, as he was none too stable himself. On the issue of westward migration, however, he would come around in time. For now he expostulated about wilderness, deserts, storms, hunger, and “the savage, snowy precipices of the Rocky Mountains.”42

Still farther east, on the other side of the Atlantic, The Edinburgh Review was inclined to Grecely’s present view of westward migration. The interior of the continent was “a howling wilderness of snow and tempests,” the editor opined, a desert “of hopeless sterility,” inhabited by Indians of “more than Scythian savageness and endurance, who cannot be tracked, overtaken, or conciliated.” In short, the British had little to fear from American efforts to settle the Pacific Northwest: “Oregon will never be colonized overland from the United States.”43 Other newspapers in Britain and the United States took much the same tone.44

By the spring of 1843 the pattern for travel to Oregon was set, at least to a certain degree, and the experience of that year’s emigrants taught additional refinements. Those wishing to make the trip gathered in northwestern Missouri, near Independence, in the spring of 1843. A number of them held an organizational meeting on May 20, just west of Independence, and elected Peter H. Burnett as captain of that year’s wagon train. The experience of previous emigrants had demonstrated clearly the superiority of oxen to horses or mules for pulling the wagons across the continent. “The ox is a most noble animal,” wrote a grateful Burnett after his crossing, “patient, thrifty, durable, gentle, and does not run off.” He predicted that future Oregon emigrants would “be in love with their oxen. The ox will plow through mud, swim over streams, dive into thickets, and he will eat almost anything.”45

By May 21 some 120 wagons were on hand, accompanied by perhaps 875 emigrants. In addition to the oxen (and a few mules) that would pull the wagons, another three thousand cattle and horses would accompany the party. The emigrants hired a former mountain man as a guide, and the first of the wagons rolled out of Elm Grove on May 22.46

Naturally, there were disagreements. This time the chief strife early in the journey pitted those who were bringing large numbers of cattle, which were scarce in Oregon, against those who had few if any besides their draft oxen. The latter wished to push on more rapidly and leave the herds behind, exposing them to possible danger during the crossing of the plains. Burnett finally despaired of reconciling the difference and resigned as captain. The families without cattle, about half the party, elected William Martin their captain and pressed on ahead. The cattle-owning families elected Jesse Applegate as their captain and followed behind, though to everyone’s surprise, including their own, they were able to keep pace with the supposedly faster noncattle wagon train.47

A day on the trail began at 4:00 a.m. with a volley of shots from the wagon train’s sentinels to awaken the emigrants. Amid much bustle they hurried to strike their tents, catch and hitch their teams, and take their places in the column. The emigrants were divided into platoons of four wagons, often groups of friends, neighbors, or extended family. To share equally the dust-eating misery of the rear reaches of the column, each platoon moved up one spot in the march order each day until it got its turn crossing the fresh grass and breathing the clean air at the head of the column. The next day that platoon rotated to the rear, and the progression began again. If one of a platoon’s wagons was not ready to take its place at the appointed time for departure, the whole platoon lost its place in line, creating considerable pressure on laggards not to let their friends down.48

During the day, the guide would ride ahead to choose the best route, as well as the best places for nooning and for camping that evening. With him would ride a party of men detailed to make whatever improvements the route might need, digging down the steep banks of a creek or filling in some buffalo path that lay athwart the trail. Despite their efforts, the wagons still came in for an occasional jostling, dislodging carelessly
packed cargo or breaking an axletree—with attendant frustration and delay. Men not driving wagons or working on the road detail often rode abroad to hunt game. Women and children might ride in the wagons, but more often walked along beside them across the open prairie. Nooning was an hour-long halt, during which man and beast could feed and rest and teamsters led their oxen to water. Bugles summoned the wagon train to renew the march, and an afternoon of trekking across the grasslands followed.48

Near sunset, the guide directed the head of the column to the camping place he had selected and had the teamsters circle the wagons. When the wagon corral was complete, ox chains bound the tongue of each wagon to the axle of the next, securing the draft animals inside and providing a defensive barrier against whatever dangers might lie without, chiefly Indians. Evenings were busy, at least at first, with men tending to their stock or digging shallow wells near the riverbank in order to secure clearer water than its turbid stream provided. Women went about cooking the evening meal while children gathered buffalo chips for fuel. With the next morning's 4:00 a.m. wake-up guns in prospect, travelers—or at least those who had not pulled sentinels duty—would seek sleep not long after chores and mealtime were over, though some fiddle or banjo music might round out the evening.49

The wagon train covered an average of fifteen or twenty miles per day across the prairies, a brisk pace for a mostly ox-drawn caravan. The emigrants found that the lowly ox was more durable than the horse and less desirable to the Indians, who always lurked close by, ready to steal livestock, especially horses. Many families soon realized that their wagons were far too heavily loaded, and the first hundred miles or so of trail were dotted with pieces of furniture and equipment, some quite valuable, abandoned to ease the loads on straining oxen.50

Whitman rode along. In eastern Kansas, just before the wagons had reached the Platte River, he visited the nearby camp of another army exploring expedition, led once again, as had been the case the previous summer, by Lieutenants John C. Frémont. Frémont had forty men and a twelve-pounder mountain howitzer this year, and his goal was to proceed due west from the upper Missouri towns of Independence and St. Joseph and try to find a pass through the Rockies in what is today Colorado. Then his orders called for him to scout the headwaters of whatever rivers flowed into the Gulf of California and from there to proceed northwest to Oregon. Whitman and Frémont discussed Oregon and the trails leading to it for several hours before the missionary returned to the wagon train.51

The high plains rivers were swollen with the runoff of melting snows in the Rockies, and crossings were perilous. The south fork of the Platte River required a makeshift ferrying operation that took several days. At the Laramie, by some accounts, Whitman was the only man willing to swim his mule across the swirling waters carrying the towline for yet another improvised ferrying operation, this one managed by stretching uncured buffalo hides over the wagon boxes and allowing them to dry, thus turning each wagon box into a watertight vessel that could be floated across the river.

The trail brought many other dangers. A mule died after being hit by a stray shot during the ford of the North Platte, a child some days later after falling under the wheels of a wagon. Some dangers were those common to nineteenth-century life. A man died of illness, and a few days later a second did as well. A woman successfully gave birth to a healthy child.52

On they plodded at the pace of walking oxen, across the high plains, along the valley of the Sweetwater. At Independence Rock one of them left a record of their passing: “THE OREGON CO. arrived July 26, 1843.” On August 3 the emigrants sighted the snowcapped peaks of the Rockies. Forage grew scarcer as they entered increasingly arid climate zones, and despite continued worry about the threat of Indian attack, the emigrants split up into smaller wagon groups so as not to strain local supplies of grass and water. They passed the Laramie Range on the south side of the trail, and then the Wind River Range loomed even more impressively to their right, its snowcapped peaks trailing out of sight to the northwestern horizon. In the broad valley between the Wind River Range to the north and the Antelope Hills to the south, the wagons rolled through South Pass, though if any of the emigrants noticed it, he left no record. For the weary travelers it was apparently just one more long, gradual slope covered with sagebrush and thin, sere grass in a succession of such prairie swells as they had been toiling over for what seemed a very long time. Now, however, their trend was ever so gently downhill, and the streams, when they came to them, would be flowing toward the Pacific. The emigrants were officially outside the territory of the United States.53

Whitman found a better route for the next section of trail, avoiding a dry stretch he remembered from his 1836 crossing, and led the wagon
train by a southward detour to Fort Bridger, a trappers' trading post at the foot of the towering Uintas in what is today southwestern Wyoming. The leading elements of the migration paused at Fort Hall on the Snake River, the easternmost outpost of the Hudson's Bay Company in Oregon. The company's chief official there, the highly experienced Richard Grant, told the emigrants that it was impossible to take wagons any farther west. Whitman had been traveling near the tail of the column, and at this point he came up and assured the leaders that he could take them through, wagons and all. He knew of a couple of fur trappers who had brought wagons through to Oregon two years before. The emigrants took his advice instead of Grant's and pressed on.54

By October 1, they had reached the valley of the Grande Ronde, a tributary of the Snake, and a light snowfall the next morning warned them that time was short. Ahead lay the rugged Blue Mountains. Unlike the preceding year's party, this group of emigrants had enough manpower to clear a road and so was able to take all its wagons across to the valley of the Columbia, the men often going ahead with axes while the women drove the wagons. A much heavier snowstorm hit them in the mountains, but they were able to press on and reach Whitman's mission station, where supplies awaited them. Whitman had been as good as his word, working hard not only to guide the wagon train but to provide advice, assistance, and medical attention up and down the column as needed. During the entire migration, three men had died of disease, and another had drowned. The column's numbers had increased, however, as more than that many babies had been born along the way.

Having brought the party through to his station as promised, Whitman could lead them no farther. It was now too late in the season to cross the Cascade Range, so most of the travelers left their wagons at Whitman's station for the winter, and building rafts from the abundant timber that clad the hills, they pressed on via the Columbia River, passing through its gorge to reach the west side of the Cascades, though with much difficulty and hardship. The Oregon winter had set in by then, and rain was incessant. The officials of the Hudson's Bay Company, though not at all eager to encourage American settlement in Oregon, nevertheless would not let the new arrivals starve and kindly provided supplies to help them get through that first winter.55

The new arrivals represented an enormous addition to the population of Oregon. Earlier in 1843, before the arrival of Whitman's wagon train, settlers already living in Oregon had voted 52–50 to establish a provisional government. The new arrivals increased the number of American settlers in Oregon fivefold. Their letters home brought enticing news of Oregon to more eastern communities than ever before. The fact that the 1843 migration had been able to take its wagons all the way through to Oregon was especially impressive and encouraging.56

The year 1844 brought an even larger migration across the plains and mountains, and in 1845 another three thousand pioneers flocked into Oregon, almost doubling the region's population. The floodgates of American migration to the Pacific Northwest were open, and wagon trains continued to make their way across the plains and mountains in each of the remaining years of the 1840s, rapidly populating the Oregon Country with American settlers.57
CHAPTER FIVE

The Allure and the Danger of California

South of Oregon was California. A distant and semiautonomous province of Mexico, California had drifted along in pleasant indolence for decades before gaining the notice of substantial numbers of Americans. Yankee trading ships called regularly there during the first half of the nineteenth century, trafficking in sea otter pelts and then conducting the even more extensive hide and tallow trade. A sprinkling of Americans began to stay and settle along the California coast, some of them as agents of the hide and tallow traders. These, along with others who did not choose to remain in the province, wrote glowing accounts of the region’s potential, calling the attention of their eastern compatriots to this delightful part of the western coast of their continent.1

The most famous of these was published in 1840—the year of the log cabin and hard cider campaign—by Richard Henry Dana. Entitled Two Years Before the Mast, Dana’s book recounts his journey to California on the brig Pilgrim. A scion of an old Massachusetts family and a recent graduate of Harvard, Dana had thought an ocean voyage advisable for his health, but rather than taking passage to Europe and back in the comfort of a passenger cabin, as any normal young man of his class would have done, Dana had shipped “before the mast” as a common sailor on the Pilgrim, a vessel bound around Cape Horn for California in the hide and tallow trade. Dana waxed enthusiastic about the glories of California—forests, mountains, streams teeming with beaver and fish, valleys covered with immense herds of cattle, rich soil that yielded bumper crops, and the finest climate in the world. Yet he felt the inhabitants were too lazy to take advantage of their good fortune. “In the hands of an enterprising people,” he wrote, “what a country this might be!”2

The United States had plenty of enterprising people, and some of them were soon making plans for California. Organized migration to California began more or less simultaneously with that to Oregon, though it was never as large. The first party of overland emigrants for California came from Platte County, in western Missouri. The sixty-nine men, women, and children who left their homes for the westward trek were those who had heeded the exhortations of the returned trapper Antoine Robidoux, who praised California. The emigrants had resisted the warnings of those local merchants who slandered the distant shore because they did not want to lose business. The band of pioneers set out in May 1841, the year before Elijah White and Lansford Hastings and their party made their own westward migration to Oregon. The California emigrants were fortunate enough to encounter the mountain man Thomas Fitzpatrick, who would skillfully guide White and Hastings the following year. Fitzpatrick was on his way to Oregon and readily agreed to hire on as guide for the California-bound group until their ways parted. They followed the route of the Oregon Trail up the valley of the Platte, past Fort Laramie and Independence Rock, along the Sweetwater, and through South Pass.3

By the time they reached Soda Springs, near modern-day Pocatello, Idaho, nearly half of the emigrants had decided to divert to Oregon instead, since that would allow them to follow an experienced guide on a well-blazed trail. Thirty-four hardy souls, including one woman and one child, exchanged their wagons for pack saddles and set out southwestward toward California, knowing only that they must bear west from the Great Salt Lake. They were delighted to find a westward-flowing river, Nevada’s Humboldt, on September 23. This curious stream rose in the mountains of northern Nevada and trended generally west-southwest across the Great Basin, dodging mountain ranges and providing the ideal corridor through which this washboard of horst and graben topography.4

If the pioneers of this first party knew any name for the river, it would probably have been Ogden’s River, after its discoverer, Hudson’s Bay Company explorer Peter Skene Ogden. It went by several monikers until it received its modern name in 1848. Finding this highway between the ranges must have seemed too good to be true for the small band of emigrants, and so it turned out to be. As they followed it downstream, the river seemed to grow smaller, in defiance of all their experience with rivers, if not of the laws of nature itself. Rivers certainly did nothing like that in Missouri. Then, to what must have been their unspeakable dismay, this semialkaline remnant of a river flowed into a marshy lake—and stopped. The Humboldt is the largest North American river whose waters naturally fail to reach the sea. Sinking into the ground and evaporating into the air, the river simply ends at the intermittent lake known as the Humboldt Sink.

There was nothing to do now but strike southwestward across the
desert toward the Sierra Nevada, still some fifty miles away. By October 16 the mountains loomed before them, and their scouts reported them “barely passable.” Some advocated backtracking to Fort Hall in Idaho before winter snows cut off that way of escape, but they were almost certainly already too late for that. They pressed on into the mountains, and on the next-to-last day of October, they discovered a river flowing west, the Stanislaus, and followed it to the Central Valley of California, arriving exhausted and almost unable to believe they had finally reached the promised land.5

Thirty-four Americans were not exactly going to populate the province, even followed as they were by two other small bands of Americans who in the months to come made their way into California from New Mexico and Oregon. The latter party, forty members in all, came in 1843 and was led by Lansford Hastings, captain of the 1842 Oregon wagon train. Like others before him, Hastings, by then twenty-four years old, became quite enamored of California and enthusiastic about his own prospects there, especially if many more Americans should migrate there and elect him to office within whatever political entity their presence might engender.

To boost migration to California, Hastings published his Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California, telling the story of his 1842 trip to Oregon and his journey down to California the next year, and giving suggestions about the trail. One tip involved a possible shortcut. Hastings had noticed, as anyone could who studied a map of the route to California, that the trail bent first northwest for a couple of hundred miles and then southwest. A future wagon train could, at least in theory, save a considerable distance by cutting across this bend in the trail. If the emigrants broke away from the Oregon Trail a bit sooner, cut across what is today northern Utah, and rejoined the established California Trail in modern-day Nevada, the trip would be shortened and thus the danger of being caught in the late autumn snows of the Sierra Nevada would be diminished.6

Another party of Americans had come to California, temporarily, in 1842, but not by the usual route or for the purposes of settlement. In September of that year, Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, commanding the United States Navy’s Pacific Squadron, was cruising off Peru when he received a report that the United States and Mexico had gone to war and that Great Britain intended to make the most of the occasion by seizing California. After consulting with his ship captains, he decided
had thought they had reached the Pacific. Frémont was determined to explore the lake and at least one of its islands using a canoe-shaped eighteen-foot, six-man inflatable rubber boat he had brought along.9

When they reached the lake, Frémont, Carson, and several of their men climbed into the frail craft and paddled through the whitecaps to the nearest of the islands, a five-mile-long hump of land that now bears Frémont’s name. Carson’s skepticism about the patent boat proved well founded when the flimsy vessel nearly swamped and two of its air chambers began to separate from each other. Somehow it held together well enough to carry them to the island and back, with one member of the party constantly pumping a handheld bellows to maintain sufficient air pressure. The view from the island’s high point revealed the amazing expanse of the lake, from its turquoise shallows to the wine-dark waters where the shadows of clouds or islands cloaked its deeper reaches. Rimming the lake and seeming scarcely to rise above its surface were wide, flat salt-white beaches that finally gave way to dun-colored, almost treeless slopes rolling upward from the shore. Scoring the hillsides a few hundred feet above the surface of the lake was the scar of a previous shoreline, from a time when a much larger lake had occupied the entire valley and several adjoining ones, a remnant of the earth’s catastrophic geologic past. Beyond the grassy hills that surrounded the lake rose the great majestic wall of the Wasatch front to the east, while lower but still impressive ranges marked the horizon to the north and south.10

Reluctantly, Frémont resisted the temptation to make further explorations of the lake in his frail boat this late in the season, and having rejoined the main body of his expedition, he turned their course toward Oregon. Working their way north again, Frémont and his explorers cut back onto the Oregon Trail at Fort Hall and pressed west, crossing the Blue Mountains in October and visiting Whitman’s mission at Waiilatpu, though missing the good doctor himself, who was making his rounds to the mission station at The Dalles. Frémont’s expedition continued on to the Willamette Valley. Though his orders specified that he should return to the States at this point, Frémont decided to enter California. He first led his party south into what is today northwestern Nevada and then, incredibly, proposed that they cross the Sierra Nevada in mid-January. Fortunately for Frémont and his men, it was a mild winter in the Sierras, yet the band of tough explorers and mountain men barely survived the crossing. Most of their horses and mules did not. Nearing starvation and suffering from frostbite and snow blindness, the men staggered into the valley of the Sacramento River in early March and were all but overwhelmed by the roughness of the enormous valley after the barren wastes through which they had come.11

Where the American River joined the Sacramento, they found the settlement of Johann Augustus Sutter. Sutter had emigrated from Switzerland to escape bad debts and perhaps the wife and children he abandoned when he left. Coming to California in 1839, he had gained favor with the local government by exaggerating his importance in the old country, particularly his role in the Swiss army reserve. In talking to his new hosts, Sutter promoted himself from first underlieutenant to captain. The Mexican rulers of California granted him fifty thousand acres and local authority that he boasted extended to “the power of life and death over everyone in his district.” Sutter even possessed his own fort, a stronghold with adobe walls eighteen feet high and from two to a half to five feet thick. Two-story corner bastions mounted more than ten cannon. Inside, the fort bustled with all manner of artisans—from blacksmiths to carpenters to coopers—who maintained the Swiss emigrant’s extensive domains. Sutter received the haggard Americans hospitably, commenting, “The starvation and fatigue they had endured rendered them truly deplorable objects.”12

Frémont and his men camped outside the walls of the fort for sixteen days, partaking of Sutter’s sumptuous fare for most of their meals. California was exerting its charm on the trail-weary explorers, and three of Frémont’s men sought and received their discharge and took service under Sutter. Frémont reoutfitted his expedition, including new animals, by purchase from Sutter. Then in late March he led his men down the Central Valley of California. From the locals he had learned that the best way out of California would be south into the San Joaquin Valley, which he and his men found teeming with game and with herds of wild horses, then east over a much lower pass than he had traversed when entering the Central Valley that winter. From there, a route called the Old Spanish Trail would lead him to Santa Fe and allow further exploration of the region between the Rockies and the Sierras, a region Frémont was starting to call the Great Basin. Once again Frémont returned to civilization after an expedition that won him further renown as the Pathfinder.13

Ordinary Americans continued to flock westward along the trails toward both Oregon and California, spurred and instructed by the guidebooks of Frémont and Hastings. Most arrived safely, but in 1846 one group of emigrants demonstrated just how much could go wrong along the trail and how much it could cost an unwary or unlucky band of travelers.
During the winter of 1845–46, the brothers George and Jacob Donner made plans to emigrate from their home in Sangamon County, Illinois, to California. The Donners were substantial farmers living in the middle of the best farming country on the face of the globe, but they hoped for better things in California. Sixty-two-year-old George Donner, the younger of the brothers, epitomized the population of America’s western states in that era with his readiness to believe that better land was to be found somewhere farther on. He had migrated from his native North Carolina to Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois before trying a stint in Texas, then returning to Illinois. As sketched in Frémont’s glowing reports, Hastings’s Emigrants’ Guide, and the editorial page of the local Springfield Journal, California sounded like just the place for George Donner.14

With their families, their hired hands, and several of their neighbors, the Donners formed a party of thirty-three and pushed off with nine wagons from the town square in Springfield, Illinois, in mid-April 1846. Following the customary route, they traveled through Independence, Missouri, and set out from there onto the open prairie on May 12. A week later they joined a larger wagon train led by William H. Russell. The addition of the Donners’ party brought the group’s total to about two hundred men, women, and children. By one count, more than five hundred wagons were on the overland trail that spring, with the Donners’ wagon train being near the tail end of an intermittent procession that stretched for more than 150 miles.15

The journey across the plains went well, despite the occasional violent thunderstorm. George’s wife, Tamsen, wrote from the trail along the Platte River a letter addressed to a friend who had stayed back in Illinois, telling her how pleasant and easy the journey had been thus far. Even cooking over a fire of buffalo chips had proven no hardship, and Tamsen pronounced the new fuel as good as hickory chips. The Indians were friendly, the prairie “beautiful beyond description.” “Indeed,” she added, “if I do not experience something far worse than I have yet done, I shall say the trouble is all in getting started.”16

When the party celebrated Independence Day at Fort Laramie, it was a bit behind the ideal pace for crossing the continent, but not dangerously so. Two weeks later, however, near the Little Sandy River in what is today Wyoming, the wagon train reorganized into several smaller parties. Part of the reason for the reorganization was an “open letter” to California-bound emigrants from Lansford Hastings. From the headwaters of the Sweetwater River, Hastings sent his missive back down the trail in the hands of a messenger on horseback. The letter was addressed to anyone making for California and urged the virtues of the proposed shortcut he had suggested in his recently published Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California. Hastings claimed that his new route, the Hastings Cutoff, would shorten the journey to California by some two hundred miles.

In his letter, Hastings promised to wait at Fort Bridger and guide the travelers over the new route. Despite the offer, most of the wagon trains chose to stick with the proven route. Among those facing a decision at the fort was A. J. Grayson, traveling with his young wife. The news of Hastings’s proposal “created some excitement among the emigrants,” Grayson recalled. “Some were for going the new route without reflecting, whilst the more prudent were for going by the old trail via Fort Hall.” Grayson asked an experienced mountain man at Fort Bridger for his opinion, and got emphatic advice to stick with the old trail. He did.17

The Donners chose the cutoff. With that route in mind, they and several other families formed a new wagon train and on July 20 elected George Donner its captain. The newly formed party numbered eighty-seven people and twenty-three wagons. Spirits were high at the prospect of a better route that would save them hundreds of miles of weary travel. The only exception was Tamsen Donner, who thought they were foolish to leave the established trail on the word of a man they did not know and who might turn out to be merely a “selfish adventurer.”18

Five days after breaking camp on the Little Sandy, the Donner Party, as it was now called, reached Fort Bridger, the beginning of the Hastings Cutoff. There they found that Hastings had recently departed, leading a party of sixty-six wagons bound for California via the south shore of the Great Salt Lake. Nonetheless, Hastings had left word at the fort that any California-bound emigrants should follow behind him. They would find the road “smooth, level, and hard” under their wagon wheels, leading through country with plenty of wood and water; good pasturage for their stock—except in a single forty-mile dry stretch—and no canyons to traverse.19

For the first few days out of Fort Bridger, the new trail lived up to its billing as it took them steadily southwest, directly toward the looming mass of the Wasatch Range. On August 3 the Donner Party reached the mouth of Weber Canyon, leading into the Wasatch, and at the first crossing of the Weber River, they found a piece of paper held aloft in the split end of a stick. It was a note from Hastings informing any emigrants who might be following behind him that Weber Canyon was all but impassable to wagons and that he had little hope of getting through with the
would be as flat as any they could have longed for during the journey through the Wasatch, but utterly devoid of water. Hour after hour the wagons creaked and groaned over the whitish sandy floor of the desert, raising clouds of alkaline dust from the evaporite deposits of the massive lake that had once covered these salt flats. With only brief halts they pressed on day and night.

Humans and animals began to falter on the fourth day. Men unhitched the oxen and took them ahead to water, then brought them back for the wagons and the women and children. The first oxen reached water on the evening of the fourth day, and by the following morning, all of the wagon train had done so as well, leaving behind several dozen cattle that had died along the trail and others that had stampeded toward the water and been lost. When a weeklong search failed to recover the missing animals, some of the wagons and possessions had to be left behind as the party limped forward. The first snow of the journey fell on them at their desert oasis before they departed for another twenty-two-hour dry pull across a western arm of the desert.

By this time it was clear that their provisions would run out well before they could hope to reach the settlements of California, so after discussing the matter the emigrants decided that two men should ride ahead to Sutter's Fort and bring back supplies for the rest of the party. While the two rode on, the situation of the wagon train continued to deteriorate. They struck the main track of the California Trail in what is today eastern Nevada at least three weeks later than they would have if they had not taken the cutoff. On September 24, they reached the Humboldt, which they still called Ogden's River.

Their progress down the Humboldt was a procession of misery. Cattle and horses began to die from exhaustion and the alkaline water. Local Indians, sensing the weakness of the party, began to steal cattle or shoot arrows into oxen that strayed within range of their covets. They shot at men who ventured out from the caravan too, but hit none. By October 5 tempers had frayed to the point that one of the more popular members of the party became enraged and attacked a fellow emigrant—who killed him in self-defense. The killer, though one of the most capable men in the party and entirely innocent in the affair, was banished from the wagon train and forced to ride on to California alone.

The wagon train reached the Humboldt Sink at midnight on October 12, and the next morning, while they were eating breakfast, Indians stole twenty-one head of their oxen. This left them with scarcely enough to pull the remaining wagons, and to lighten the loads on the emaciated wagons he was then guiding. He recommended instead a different course through the mountains, which he sketched out vaguely in his note. Three men of the Donner Party rode ahead to overtake Hastings, gain more information, and, if possible, persuade him to come back and guide them through. Catching up with him near the southern end of the Great Salt Lake after a hard ride, they prevailed on him to come back as far as the Wasatch and point out the route he thought they should take, but then he felt obliged to hurry back to the other wagon train, which had gotten through Weber Canyon only by dint of backbreaking labor.

Hoping to avoid a similar difficult passage and a loss of time they now could ill afford, the emigrants of the Donner Party decided to take Hastings's advice again and try the alternate route through the Wasatch, with the goal of reaching the Great Salt Lake in one week. The trail immediately proved difficult, sometimes requiring a full day's work by all the men to make a short stretch passable for the wagons. Eight days of work completed an eight-mile wagon road into a gulch the emigrants thought would lead them through the mountains but which instead turned out to be a box canyon. When they learned they would have to backtrack the whole eight miles, the party nearly dissolved in panic, with individual families striking out on their own in the desperate quest for a way through the mountains. Cooler heads prevailed, and the men were soon back at work on a new trail.

The gorge they now took, since known as Emigration Canyon, proved to be little if any improvement on the Weber Canyon route. More labor made it just passable, and even then they had to harness six or eight yoke of oxen to drag each wagon up some of the steeper slopes. Finally, a full month after entering the Wasatch, with man and beast exhausted, wagons in need of repair, and supplies dwindling, they finally sighted the salt-white shores of the lake and congratulated themselves that they now had the most strenuous part of the journey behind them and could look forward to good roads and pleasant travel the rest of the way to California.
beasts, everyone now had to walk all the time, many of them with heavy loads. Parents carried their children. One old man, traveling alone, lay down beside the trail and died. No one had the time or strength to go back and bury him. Two days later another emigrant, a wealthy man, went missing, and suspicion rested on several other members of the party. With the wagon train strung out over a dozen miles of trail, there was plenty of solitude for a lonely murder. The party halted and several of the young men went back and recovered his wagon and oxen, but the man himself was never found.25

At this desperate juncture, Charles Stanton, one of the two men sent ahead to fetch supplies, returned with five mules loaded with flour and dried beef, all courtesy of Johann Augustus Sutter. Accompanying Stanton were two of Sutter’s Indian employees, sent along to help with the mules and guide the party over the Sierras. With their hunger assuaged, the emigrants decided to halt for a few days at the foot of the Sierras at a place called Truckee Meadows, near the site of modern-day Reno, Nevada, so that their remaining oxen could gain strength for the hard pull over the mountains. The snowcapped peaks of the Sierras stood before them a mute threat, but the first heavy snowstorms usually did not descend on these mountains until mid- to late November. October was scarcely more than half over, so the emigrants figured they had time. After a four-day pause, however, they became alarmed as dark clouds piled up on the summits above them. Fearing this might mean early snow, they decided to push on into the mountains immediately, and on October 23 they left the meadows.26

Five days later they were still toiling up the trail well short of the summit when swirling snow engulfed them and began to accumulate—six inches down at Prosser Creek, as much as five feet near the summit of the range. The snows of the Sierra Nevada had come almost a full month earlier than normal. In a state verging on panic, most of the travelers pressed on up Cold Stream Canyon toward the summit of the pass at the best speed they could, individual families or small groups desperately struggling to complete their crossing before winter fully took hold in the lofty mountains whose name meant snow. It was no use. The snows had piled up in the pass to such a depth as to block transit until spring. They were trapped.27

Unwilling to accept their plight, the emigrants paused a day or two to gather their strength and then made a concerted effort to break through. Leaving all but a few of the wagons, they strapped the most essential supplies and equipment to the backs of the oxen and mules and fought their way upward through the drifts. Again they failed to make the summit. In desperation they agreed to butcher all the animals the next day—since their other provisions were nearly gone—and, taking the meat, press on over the mountains on foot. That night, however, a powerful blizzard struck and continued to blow for the next several days. Abandoning for the time all hope of escape, the emigrants settled in for the winter as best they could in makeshift shelters of brush and saplings and a cabin or two. Most of them camped near a long, narrow mountain lake, now called Donner Lake, within sight of the summit of the pass, about six miles away, and, at just under six thousand feet, a little more than one thousand feet below it. The two Donner families camped at Alder Creek, several miles back down the trail.28

Over the next six weeks several small parties, composed mostly of young, unmarried men, tried to make their way over the mountains but were forced back. Finally, in mid-December, fifteen men and women, including parents who left their small children with relatives at the camp, set out in a desperate effort to reach the settlements and summon help. One of the men, a native of Vermont, had fashioned snowshoes for the fifteen, and some of them reckoned that even if they died on the trail, their absence from the camp would leave more of the rapidly shrinking food supply for those they left behind. They took scant rations for six days and had been out nine when, on Christmas Day, another powerful blizzard struck. One member of the party had already died, and as the storm raged, others succumbed one by one. Faced with starvation, the survivors resorted to cannibalism. On such fare, and a single deer that they succeeded in shooting, the steadily dwindling party struggled on. Seven were still alive when they reached a village of Indians, who fed them and led them to the white settlements.29

It took a few days to organize a relief expedition, which set out into the mountains on February 22, 1847. A total of four expeditions were needed to extricate all of the stranded emigrants from the Sierra snows, and by the time they arrived, some of the survivors at the Donner Lake camps had also engaged in cannibalism, though none at the Donner families’ camps at Alder Creek. Finally, amid much continued hardship and several more deaths, the rescue was completed. It was April 29 before the last survivor reached Sutter’s Fort. Of the eighty-seven travelers who started down the Hastings Cutoff back at Fort Bridger, forty-eight reached the California settlements. Thirty-nine of the pioneers had died along the way, including George Donner and his wife, Tamsen. Also dead were the two Indian vaqueros Sutter had sent along with the
provision-laden mules the previous October. Lansford Hastings himself had arrived in California the previous autumn together with the wagon train he had guided. After their backbreaking struggle through Weber Canyon, the party had made the rest of the journey to California with no more than the usual vicissitudes of overland travel and had crossed the Sierras well ahead of the snows.