

PATHFINDER

JOHN CHARLES FRÉMONT AND
THE COURSE OF AMERICAN EMPIRE



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University of Oklahoma Press : Norman

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PROLOGUE

AMID A WINDY SNOWSTORM in December of 1887, an elderly couple climbed aboard a train about to leave Manhattan's Grand Central Depot for Los Angeles. As they settled into their seats in a first-class car, the elderly man began coughing violently. His bronchitis had been aggravated by the blustery winds that buffeted their ferry crossing of the Hudson River, earlier in the day.

Though hardly tall, the man bore a stately dignity. A neatly clipped gray beard framed his long face. He was older than his wife by a decade. But she, a corpulent woman with stooped shoulders, looked the frailer. Both were well-dressed, and from the quiet stares and whispered comments of the other passengers, it was apparent that the couple was famous. But they were far from wealthy. The tickets for this trip, as well as the money they carried, had been donated by the man who owned the railroad. They were too poor to buy the tickets, and this white-haired gentleman was too old to cross the continent the way he had so many times as a young man—on foot, on mule- and horseback, and by canoe, leading caravans of scientists, soldiers, and mountain men across wild, then unnamed, mountains and deserts. But at the age of seventy-four, that was all long ago.

Not many years back, he would have refused the charity of Collis P. Huntington, the sixty-five-year-old president of the Central and Southern Pacific railroads. From the old man's perspective, his acute bronchitis and his doctor's order that he move to a warmer climate altered nothing. Personal dignity dictated that the tickets be refused. But like other men who had won fortunes in the construction of the

nation's growing matrix of transcontinental rail lines, Huntington had profited from the geographical information gathered by John Charles Frémont's expeditions. So when the old explorer expressed his reservations about accepting the tickets, the rail magnate had a ready rejoinder. "You forget," Huntington said, "our road goes over your buried campfires and climbs many a grade you jogged over on a mule; I think we rather owe you this."¹

THE RISING EMPIRE

JOHN CHARLES FRÉMONT lived a life whose epic breadth, romantic aura, and dramatic bends and curves resembled that of a character invented by, say, Theodore Dreiser, Joseph Conrad—or, better yet, James Fenimore Cooper. It was Cooper, after all, who conjured the original “Pathfinder.” In his 1840 novel of that title, Cooper hung the sobriquet on his plucky frontier protagonist, Natty Bumppo.

Two years later, when Frémont caught the eye of the American public, the editors of that era’s penny press simply transferred the title to the dashing handsome twenty-nine-year-old explorer. But Frémont was seldom a true pathfinder in that word’s literal sense, and—except during his 1856 presidential campaign, in which his political handlers incessantly invoked the term—he never called himself one. He tended to survey already-established paths. Even so, in the explorer’s widely read tales of his Western adventures, the public found enough Natty Bumppo to make the title seem apt. By compelling U.S. citizens to reimagine the geographic breadth and diversity of their nation, John Frémont more than earned the Pathfinder title.



As a leader of scientific expeditions, Frémont was often brilliant but also impulsive, vainglorious, and given to quixotic behavior. As a military leader, his actions were often even more inscrutable: he was impetuous and, throughout his life, displayed a career-crippling disdain

for authority. Though rumors of libertinism and suggestions of financial improbity followed him through his life, he was otherwise rigorously self-disciplined, and austere in his personal habits. He avoided sharing a tent with anyone who smoked, he limited his drinking to the occasional splash of claret in a glass of water, and chess was his rowdiest indulgence.

The explorer's name endures in the names of over a hundred U.S. places—ranging from counties and towns to mountains and rivers. His legacy endures, too, in California's state flag, patterned after the Bear Flag Revolt to which he lent his name, and in the scores of Western places that he named—from the Great Basin to the Humboldt River to the Golden Gate.

Frémont's career transpired before Americans parsed travel distances with automobile odometers and frequent flier points. Though he lived long enough to take trains across the country, his glory years belonged to an era when travelers seldom moved faster than the speed of a galloping horse. And no one of that era saw more of the North American continent than John C. Frémont, not even Lewis and Clark. They, after all, made but one transcontinental expedition. Frémont participated in ten exploring expeditions—four of them transcontinental crossings.

Even a cursory survey of the nineteenth century's most significant writers—including Whittier, Greeley, Emerson, and Whitman—reveals that Frémont held a central position in U.S. public life. That, after all, is why the Republicans twice called him to run for the presidency. And why President Lincoln appointed him, to command the Union's forces in the Department of the West. This explorer, mapper, naturalist, Indian fighter, soldier, politician, and railroad speculator embodied U.S. expansionism. As the nominal leader of the U.S. conquest of California, Frémont stood at the end of the nation's long push to the Pacific coast. Equally important were his ties, direct and indirect, to earlier expansionists. Frémont was, after all, the son-in-law and protégé of Thomas Hart Benton, the U.S. Senate's chief advocate and architect of U.S. expansion into the Trans-Missouri West,* and

*Senator Thomas Hart Benton (1782–1858) was a great-uncle of fellow Missourian and famed American painter Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975).

history had linked Benton to Thomas Jefferson, the Louisiana Purchase, and Lewis and Clark.



A thoroughly Byronic figure, Frémont was born in Savannah, Georgia, and grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, where he received his formal education at the College of Charleston. During the 1830s, he assisted government surveys of the Cherokee country of Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, and of the broad plateau between the Upper Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers. During the 1840s, he led three federally funded exploring expeditions of the West that captured the public's imagination and inspired thousands of Easterners—often with Frémont's expedition reports in hand—to move west.

Frémont's expedition writings, published initially by the U.S. Senate and widely reissued by private publishers, made him the mid-nineteenth century's chief popularizer of the American West. "Until the late explorations conducted by Col. Frémont [sic], very erroneous ideas have prevailed in regard to the character of the country to the westward of the Rocky Mountains," *DeBow's Review* noted in 1849. "It was customary to denounce it a hopeless, sterile waste, where the arts of civilized men could never prevail."¹

The scientific knowledge Frémont collected advanced the West's fortification, settlement, agriculture, and mining—as well as the federal government's ongoing subjugation of Indian peoples. Moreover, his explorations vanquished centuries of cartographic errors from the maps—everything from continent-shrinking distortions to mythical rivers and lakes. As Arctic explorer Adolphus Greely assessed the explorer's legacy in 1893, "In few instances did it fall to Frémont's lot to first explore any section of the country, but it was his good fortune, as it was his intent, to first contribute systematic, extended, and reliable data as to climate, elevation, physical conditions, and geographical positions."² Equally important—perhaps more important—Frémont, though never a political philosopher—indeed, by all accounts, never much given to abstract thoughts—nevertheless compelled Americans to rethink the literal, political, and metaphysical contours of what citizens of that day were not embarrassed to call the American empire.