Route for the Overland Stage

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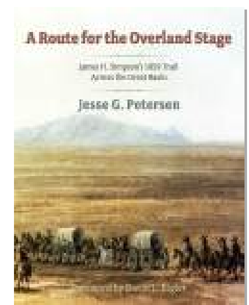

Published by Utah State University Press

Petersen, G..
Route for the Overland Stage: James H. Simpson's 1859 Trail Across the Great Basin.
Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008.
Project MUSE., https://muse.jhu.edu/.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9419

Access provided at 23 Sep 2019 11:05 GMT with no institutional affiliation

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Introduction

During the summer of 1859, Captain James Simpson of the US Army's Corps of Topographical Engineers led an expedition of exploration from Camp Floyd to Genoa. Camp Floyd was an army post in Cedar Valley, about forty miles southwest of Great Salt Lake City. Genoa was a small settlement located at the eastern foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains. The mission of the expedition was to find a practical route for wagons through the central part of Utah and Nevada. If such a route could be found, it was believed that it would shorten the distance between Salt Lake City and California by as much as two hundred miles. The members of the Simpson expedition were not the first to travel through this region of the American West. During the preceding three decades, a number of fur trappers, explorers, and emigrants had made their way across some sections of this area. Jedediah Smith, Joseph R. Walker, John Charles Frémont and Kit Carson, the Bidwell-Bartleson party, Lansford Hastings and James Clyman, the Donner-Reed party, Capt. E. G. Beckwith, O. B. Huntington, George Washington Bean, Orrin Porter Rockwell, and Howard Egan had all traveled through different sections of this territory. These travelers had cut across various portions of the region, traveling in various directions, but none of them had taken the shortest possible route from east-to-west or west-to-east, and it appears that Lansford Hastings was the only one who had taken any meaningful action toward the establishment of a wagon road through this central region.

Before the Simpson expedition, most of the travelers who intended to make the journey from Salt Lake City to California followed a route that went around the northern end of the Great Salt Lake and joined the California Trail near City of Rocks, near the Utah-Idaho border. A smaller number of California-bound travelers headed south by way of the Mormon Corridor, now the route of Interstate 15, and got onto the Old Spanish Trail near present-day Cedar City. It is true that the relatively few travelers who followed the Hastings Road did take a more central route, but about a quarter of the way across present-day Nevada, near the southern tip of the Ruby Mountains, this road turned to the north along Huntington Creek and the South Fork of the Humboldt River, and joined the California Trail not far from the city of Elko. None of these wagon routes traveled through the area that the Simpson expedition intended to explore.

It had always been apparent that a road through this central area could save many miles and perhaps a great deal of time, but until this time, no one had attempted to take wagons across the entire distance. In 1854, Col. Edward Steptoe of the US Army had given it some serious consideration. Steptoe was in the Salt Lake City area with a force of about three hundred soldiers, and wanted to find the best way to get them to California. In an effort to locate a new and shorter route, he engaged two different groups of men to make scouting trips into the desert. Oliver B. Huntington was in charge of the first group, which included himself, his nephew, an Indian named Natsab, John Reese (whose home at the time was in Carson Valley and who would later become Simpson's guide), and two

of Reese's friends. Somewhere between Salt Lake City and the Great Salt Lake they were joined by eleven soldiers who had recently deserted from Steptoe's command. Huntington's party traveled all the way to Carson Valley, most of the time following a trail that had been made earlier that year by Captain E. G. Beckwith of the army's Topographical Corps, who was engaged in a railroad survey. When Huntington and his nephew returned to Salt Lake City, they reported to Steptoe, telling him they had found a practical route that would save about two hundred miles, and they would be willing to act as guides. However, when the time came to leave for California, Huntington became evasive and Steptoe decided he was not to be trusted.[1] After Steptoe became convinced that he could not depend on Huntington's help, he obtained the services of a second group, the leader of which was Orrin Porter Rockwell. Another member of this group was George Washington Bean, who later acted as Capt. Simpson's guide during a relatively short trip into Utah's West Desert in late 1858. The Rockwell-Bean group traveled about eighty miles into the desert and when they returned, they told Steptoe that the country was not fit for wagon travel. At this, Steptoe gave up on any further attempts to find a central route and marched his troops to California by way of the north-of-the-lake and Humboldt River route.[2]

In 1855, a noted Mormon explorer named Howard Egan, and a few companions mounted on mules, made a speedy trip across this central area. Leaving from Salt Lake City, they made it to Sacramento in ten days. But like the Huntington party, they followed the Beckwith Trail to the Humboldt River near Lassen Meadows, then followed the California Trail to Sacramento.[3]

Captain Simpson first became involved in the concept of a central route in the fall of 1858, when he received orders from his commanding officer, Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, to lead an expedition of a few days' duration into Utah's western desert. As a result of this short trip, Simpson became interested in further exploration of this area, and in January 1859, he submitted a proposal to the War Department, requesting permission to make a much more extensive expedition. Johnston endorsed this proposal and forwarded it up the chain of command. In April, orders came down from army headquarters, assigning Simpson to lead an expedition that would travel from Camp Floyd to Genoa. The expedition would turn around when it reached Genoa, because of the existence of serviceable roads between there and San Francisco.

Throughout the expedition that followed, Simpson kept a daily journal, and from this he compiled an extensive report to Congress. The title of this document was *Report of Explorations across the Great Basin of the Territory of Utah for a Direct Wagon Route from Camp Floyd to Genoa, in Carson Valley, in 1859*. Simpson completed his report within a couple of years after the expedition, but primarily due to the onset of the Civil War, it was not published until 1876. The report was much more than a simple recitation of the events of the expedition. The first major section was devoted to a history of previous explorations into the region of the Great Basin, including the journeys of Fathers Domínguez and Escalante, Father Garcés, Jim Bridger, Joseph Walker, John Charles Frémont, Capt. Howard Stansbury, and Capt. E. G. Beckwith. Taking up thirteen pages of the report, this section shows that Simpson had done his homework, and had familiarized himself with the available information relating to previous explorations of the country he was about to enter.

The next ninety-two pages of the report consist of Simpson's account of each day's journey, and a description of the country through which they traveled. Simpson did not limit himself to simply reporting the basic facts about where they went and when they got there. He described the country in some detail, talking about geographical features and the existence, or lack of, water and forage. Some of Simpson's entries reflected his enthusiasm and apparent enjoyment of what he was doing. An example of this was written on May 26 as the expedition left a campsite in Central Nevada's Monitor Valley.

> *The crack of the whip, the "gee! Get up!" of the teamsters, the merry laugh, the sudden shout from the exuberance of spirits, the clinking of armor, the long array of civil, military, and economic personnel, in due order, moving with hope to our destined*

end, coupled with the bright, bracing morning, and, at times, twittering of birds, make our morning departure from camp very pleasing.[4]

Following the description of the journey, the report contains 346 pages, which include twenty different subsections on such subjects as astronomical observations, tables of distances, geological information, descriptions and drawings of indigenous wildlife, and descriptions of the native inhabitants of the area.

My interest in the Simpson expedition was a result of my interest in the history of the Lincoln Highway. I was attending the Lincoln Highway Association's 1996 conference in Reno, Nevada, when one of the presenters mentioned that the historic highway had followed much of the route that James Simpson had opened through Nevada in 1859. I had been vaguely aware of the Simpson expedition for some time, but this comment stirred my interest. A short time later, I obtained a used copy of the Simpson report and started studying it. I soon found that a general concept of the location of the Simpson route could be gathered from the report, but it proved to be quite difficult to translate the exact details of the route onto modern maps. After reading the report, I started looking for other books that included information about the expedition. It did not take long to discover that although the general route of Simpson's expedition seemed to be fairly well known, specifics were vague. And the more I learned about it, the more I wanted to figure out exactly where the expedition had gone.

My next step was to obtain a number of United States Geological Survey (USGS) 30 × 60 minute series maps. Then, working from Simpson's descriptions of his travels, I started drawing lines on the map which showed where I thought the trail might have been. After doing this for a while, I decided that I would have to get into the field and travel the route wherever I could. Since that time, I have traveled the entire route, driving wherever possible, and hiking many sections that are not accessible by automobile. Eventually I came to the decision that I would have to write something that would document what I had learned about the route.

When I first began writing about the expedition, my inclination was to simply report on what I had learned about the location of the route. Later on, I began to realize that how I reached these conclusions, and what I had done in attempting to verify them, were also important parts of the story. As a result, this work is comprised of two separate but mutually dependent and interrelated components. First is the information that relates to the location of the route and the campsites. The second component is a description of how I came up with this information and some of the experiences that I had during my travels along the trail. Today, much of the route can be easily driven in an ordinary family vehicle, and I have said very little about my travels along these sections. What I have described are my experiences in traveling the more difficult, off-pavement sections of the expedition's route.

I feel a need to mention to the reader that I am not attempting to offer irrefutable proof of anything. I am only attempting to share what I believe to be reasonable and logical conclusions about the most likely route, and the most likely locations for the campsites. These conclusions have been reached after studying Simpson's description of the terrain, after plotting his mileage figures onto modern maps, and after making many on-site visits to the areas involved.

In developing my conclusions about the route, I did not always get it right the first time. In fact, in many instances I failed to get it right the second and the third times. Tentative locations were moved around on the map up to a dozen or more times before I was finally satisfied. On several occasions, after studying the maps and making my best guess about the location of the route, I traveled to the area in question and found that the terrain would not have allowed the wagons to follow the route that I had projected. When this happened, it was back to the maps to look for other possibilities.

When I first started on this project, I had a presumption that much of the route would travel through roadless areas, and I would be seeing very little evidence of the trail. It soon became clear that the exact opposite is true. I found that a high percentage of Simpson's route soon evolved

into well-traveled roads, and many of these are still in use today. Some sections of the route have been paved and are now a part of major highways, such as US Highway 50 and US 95. Some are well-maintained and frequently traveled dirt and gravel roads. There are also a number of sections that are now abandoned, but can still be driven in high-clearance vehicles. Other abandoned sections are not drivable, but are still recognizable as traces in the sagebrush. There are only a very few sections where no visible evidence of a trail can be found today.

The methods that I used in attempting to determine the route evolved over time. In the beginning, my only tools were the USGS 30 × 60 minute maps and a pair of dividers. Before my research was finished, I had learned how to use global positioning satellite (GPS) technology, and was making use of mapping systems and aerial photography programs that are available on the Internet. Microsoft Terraserver and Google Earth are the programs that I have used most extensively.

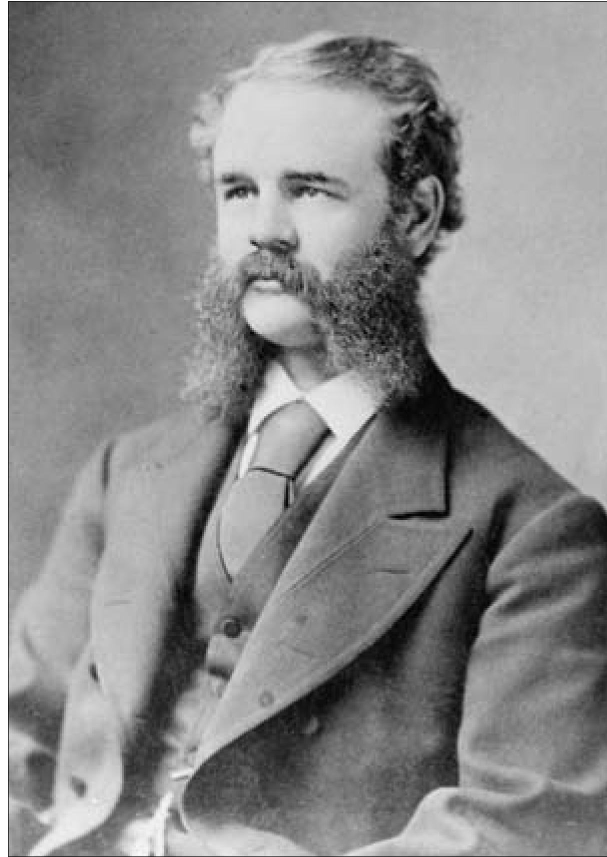
As briefly mentioned above, my first steps in looking for the trail were to open my copy of Simpson's report, spread a map on the table, carefully study the description of the route that had been traveled during a particular day, and attempt to plot that route on the map. I would look for features that might correspond with Simpson's descriptions, and would use dividers to measure the distances between tentatively identified points. I would repeat this process a number of times, all the while looking for alternate possibilities. By using this process, I was able to develop a general theory about the approximate location of the route, but was still a long way from determining its exact alignment.

Then I began taking trips to areas that contained sections of what I felt was the most likely route. My first long-distance trip was in the summer of 1999. This journey took me from Camp Floyd to Middlegate Station in central Nevada. As this was just a familiarization trip, I intentionally bypassed many of the hard-to-get-to places, including several mountain passes. I later returned to these places and found my way across them, either in my four-wheel-drive sports utility vehicle (SUV) or on foot. During the following years, I made many more trips, most of which were for only one or two days, but a few lasted for nearly a week.

In 2002 I obtained a GPS receiver and began learning how to make use of this technology. This greatly improved my ability to get to the places that I had located on the maps. I could now be certain that I was where I wanted to be when I attempted to make on-site visits to certain sections of the trail.

A little later, I learned about the Terraserver website, and found that I could print copies of small sections of USGS 7.5-minute maps. By taping these sections together and using a set of dividers, I could make measurements that were much more accurate than the measurements I could get on the 30 × 60 minute maps. I also began studying aerial photos that are available on the Terraserver website. In 2005, I started using the Internet mapping program called Google Earth. This program is quite versatile, and when combined with reliable GPS data, makes it possible to obtain highly precise measurements between identified locations.

Included with Simpson's report to Congress was a map entitled "Map of Wagon Routes in Utah Territory Explored & Opened by Capt. J. H. Simpson Topl Engrs, U. S. A. Assisted by Lieuts. J. L. K. Smith and H. S. Putnam Topl. Engrs. U. S. A. and Mr. Henry Engelmann, in 1858–59." From the very beginning of my research, I was aware that this map existed, but it took me two years to obtain a copy of it, and this copy was about a quarter of the original size. It was helpful to have this copy, but it was so small that it was of limited value. After another two years I was fortunate enough to find and purchase a second copy of the reprint of the report, which included a large copy of the map. The text that appears on this map indicates that the actual drawing was done by a J. P. Mechlin, probably a draftsman or cartographer employed by the Topographical Corps, but there is no doubt that the map was drawn under Simpson's direct supervision. The original of this map is in the National Archives, in the Division of Cartographic Records. Obtaining a larger copy of Simpson's map helped a great deal, but I soon discovered that even with the large map, the scale limits its usefulness in determining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William Lee, an eighteen-year-old civilian member of the Simpson expedition.

exact details of the route. After all, it covers all of the area between the Green River in Wyoming and the city of Sacramento. For my purposes, the most helpful aspect of the map is that it shows the shape and general alignment of the various segments of the trail.

For several years, my only direct source of information about the Simpson route was his official report of the expedition. It was not until much later that I learned of the existence of a journal that had been written by eighteen-year-old William Lee, one of the expedition's civilian members. Simpson described Lee as one of his assistants, whose duties were that of a "chronometer-keeper" and "meteorological assistant."[5] In the orders that Simpson issued to the members of the expedition a few days prior to their departure was the following: "Messrs. Edward Jagiello and William Lee will assist the above named officers [Smith and Putnam] in the required observations in the mode which may be found most expedient."[6] The entries in his journal indicate that Lee spent a lot of his time collecting specimens of plants and small animals, and assisting with the scientific observations. Lee probably owed his assignment to the fact that he was from a prominent family that had some influence with either Simpson or some other army officer.[7] Lee's journal begins on April 11, 1858, when he left Washington, DC. Two days later, he reported to Simpson in Cincinnati, and traveled with him to Fort Leavenworth. Lee was with the Army's Fourth Column when it left Fort Leavenworth on May 31 to march to Utah. He arrived at Camp Floyd on December 19.[8]

The country between Camp Floyd and Genoa is a striking example of what geologists and geographers call "basin and range." Throughout this extremely arid region, numerous mountain ranges run in a north-south direction, appearing at almost regularly spaced intervals. Between the mountains are flat-bottomed valleys covered with thick growths of sagebrush and greasewood. In many of the valleys, there

are expanses of alkali flats, which support no vegetation whatsoever.

Simpson's objective was to find the shortest route across this country, but during virtually every step of the way, the expedition was faced with finding two things that invariably conflicted with traveling a straight line. First, they had to find water, and second, they had to find a way to get through, or around, the next mountain range. With a few notable exceptions, every bend in their trail was the result of their search for these two things.

Although the general route of Simpson's western journey has been fairly well known, information about the details of the route and the exact locations of the camps has been very limited. Brief accounts of the expedition have been included in a number of books about the exploration of the West, but the few maps that accompany these accounts provide only a general concept of the route. Possibly the most accurate of these maps appears in W. Turrentine Jackson's *Wagon Roads West: A Study of Federal Road Surveys and Construction in the Trans-Mississippi West, 1846–1869*, which was first published in 1952. But due to the problems of scale, even Jackson's map would not be of much help to anyone wanting to follow the exact route of the expedition.

I believe that my research has uncovered a few misconceptions that have developed about Simpson's route. One common idea about the route shows up in the reprint of Simpson's report that was published in 1983. In the foreword, Steven Zink makes the comment that "present-day US Highway 50 runs along much of the trail Simpson blazed in 1859."[9] The operative word here is "much," and the question is just how much is much? The Simpson expedition's outbound trail covered approximately 560 miles as it traversed the western part of Utah and most of Nevada. I was able to determine that the expedition traveled either directly on the route of US 50, or within a couple miles of it, for about 145 miles. Does this qualify as "much of the trail"?

Another example is found in *Traveling America's Loneliest Road*, an excellent book about the country along the route of US 50 in Nevada that was published in 2000. In referring to Simpson's expedition, this book indicates that the westbound route first intersected US 50 near Lone Mountain in Eureka County, and from there the expedition "traveled a route that eventually became the present day US 50, west to Genoa in Carson Valley."[10] My research indicates that this statement is only partially correct. It is true that Simpson first struck the route of US 50 near Lone Mountain, but at this point, the expedition crossed that highway, rather than joining it. From here to Genoa, Simpson's westbound route intersected US 50 four more times, but out of the approximately 220 miles between Lone Mountain and Carson City, Simpson traveled on it, or within a couple miles of it, for no more than sixty miles.

Referring to Simpson's return route, the above publication says, "on the return trip east, the expedition stayed to the south, closely following what is now the US 50 route all the way to the present Utah border." This statement, also, is only partially correct. It begins with the usual misconception that the return route was always to the south of the outbound route. In actual fact, out of the approximately 570 miles that Simpson traveled during the return journey, about 115 of those miles were identical to the outbound trail, while about 85 miles of this trail were to the north of the outbound route. Which means that 200 miles of the trail, or about thirty-five percent of the return route, was not south of the outbound route. And does Simpson's return route actually follow US 50 all that closely? Of course, that depends on what you think "closely" means, but if we consider "close" to be anywhere within five miles of the highway, we find that of the 380 miles that US 50 covers between Carson City and the Utah border, Simpson was "close" to it for about 250 miles.

None of this is meant to suggest that Simpson should not be given credit for opening up the US 50 corridor. He did do that, and in doing so, his expedition had a significant impact on the history of the West.

The Simpson expedition also had a significant impact on the place names of the region. Due to the limited exploration of the area, many of the geographical features they encountered had not yet been given non-Indian names. Simpson evidently felt that a part of his responsibility was to

make sure that every significant geographical feature had a name. However, he did not necessarily feel that he had to give everything a new name. At one point, he stated that his intention was to preserve the Indian names whenever it seemed to be practical.[11] He did give new names to approximately seventy locations and geographical features, in most instances using the names of military acquaintances and government officials. In a few instances, he used descriptive terms. Many of the names that Simpson bestowed are still in use today, some have been replaced with different names, and a few have been moved to different places. Although it was not his idea, his own name has been used a number of times. At least two springs, a creek, a mountain pass, and a parklike area bear his name today. In the quoted material that appears in this book, whenever the modern name differs from the name that Simpson used, the modern name is inserted within brackets.

Following good military procedure, Simpson identified the expedition's campsites with numbers, using numbers 1 through 38 during the westbound trip. He then started over, using numbers 1 through 35 for the eastbound journey. Thus, the total of the numbers used comes to seventy-three. However, there were only seventy different campsites. The Genoa campsite was designated as both westbound number 38 and eastbound number 1. In Carson City, the expedition probably occupied the same campsite during both the westbound and eastbound trips. And the report makes it very clear that westbound camp number 21 and eastbound camp number 14 occupied same site. In the material that follows, the letters "W" and "E" are included with the camp numbers to indicate westbound and eastbound.

During my research and travels along the route, I found it possible to drive a vehicle to fifty-two of the campsites. Reaching seventeen of the sites requires a high-clearance vehicle of some type. Of the campsites that are inaccessible to vehicles, seven can be reached by walking less than a quarter of a mile, four are about a half mile from a road, and seven require a hike of about a mile.

As I began looking for the campsites, I tried to develop an idea of what sort of an area they would have tried to find. In the report, Simpson included a brief description of one of the campsites.

> *Our little camp, made up of four wall-tents, three Sibleys, and three common tents, with our twelve covered wagons and two spring or instrument wagons, with all the appurtenances of living men and animals, constitute quite a picturesque scene.*[12]

This all seems to indicate that when it came time to choose a site for an overnight camp, they would have looked for a fairly level area with enough space to erect their tents and park their wagons and ambulances. A Sibley tent has a round base of about ten to twelve feet in diameter and resembles the tipi most commonly used by the Native Americans of the central plains. The army at that time used various square or rectangular wall tents and common tents, and the dimensions of those used by the expedition are uncertain. Simpson also mentioned a barometer tent, in which they would set up a tripod and hang the barometers from it. One morning a couple of the mules got a little feisty and ran into this tent, knocking the tripod over. The barometers sustained some damage but, fortunately, they could be repaired.[13] Although Simpson makes no mention of it, it is probably safe to assume that they had some sort of cook tent, or at least a shelter under which the cook could do his work. Taking all this into consideration, the expedition's campsites would have required a fairly large, and preferably level, area.