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Route for the Overland Stage

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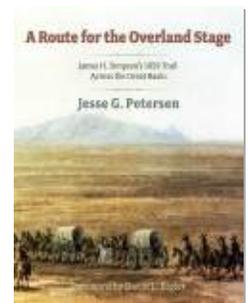
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Twelve

After the Return

SIMPSON ARRIVED BACK at Camp Floyd on the evening of August 3, 1859. The following day General Johnston issued a set of orders that included the following:

HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT OF UTAH
Camp Floyd, Utah, August 4, 1859

Captain Simpson will dispatch a subaltern of his party over the last 100 miles of his new route, with minute instructions to straighten the portion west of Rush Valley, and establish guide-marks upon it. A detail of one non-commissioned officer and ten dragoons, rationed for twelve days, will escort this officer. This detachment will be immediately prepared, and held ready to march on the arrival of the surveying party.

The depot quartermaster will provide the necessary transportation and material for making stakes, and also for water-troughs at a particular point which Captain Simpson will designate.¹

There can be little doubt that these orders were issued at Simpson's suggestion. This action makes it apparent that both Simpson and Johnston believed that the return route would make a better wagon road than the outbound trail. Simpson made this clear when he reported the party's arrival at Camp Floyd.

August 5, Camp Floyd.—Topographical party, with escort under Lieutenant Murry, reached this post this afternoon. It seems that Pete was too late in reaching Lieutenant Murry with the hatchets, the party having got through the difficult portion of Oak Pass before they met. The road through the

pass has not been made as practicable for wagons as I had intended, but, in consequence of the General Johnston Pass, 5 miles farther north, being wider and therefore not so liable to obstruction by snow in the winter, and it not lengthening the route a great deal, probably my return route should have come into Rush Valley by this pass. In order to make this connection with my outward route, Lieutenant Smith has received from me, by direction of General Johnston, verbal orders to this effect, and also the following instructions in relation to the shortening the route between Tyler's Springs and William's Spring, and establishing water-troughs at the Marmaduke Spring.²

Simpson had already decided to abandon the route that he and the expedition had followed over the Sheeprack Mountains, but he remained determined to establish a road that would follow his "true route" through the center of the Drum Mountains, rather than the route that the expedition had followed through Swasey Bottom, past the southern base of Topaz Mountain and over the western ridge of Keg Mountain. This decision was made in spite of the fact that no one had actually traveled that route. Since the wagons did not arrive at Camp Floyd until sometime during the afternoon of August 5, and since Lieutenant Smith's orders were dated that same day, it appears that he had hardly gotten off his horse when he was handed his orders to head back along the trail. These orders read as follows:

Sir: You will to-morrow proceed to Camp No. 32, near William's Spring, on our return-route from

*Genoa, for the purpose of straightening the road thence to Tyler's Spring, making the Marmaduke, or, as it has been called, the Big Horn Spring, a point of the road.... You will take with you suitable stakes and guide-boards for marking out the road, as also a number of wooden troughs for the purpose of collecting and economizing the water of the Marmaduke Spring for the benefit of emigrants and other travelers.*³

Traveling with two wagons and escorted by eleven dragoons, Smith left Camp Floyd on the morning of August 6. The detail followed the expedition's outbound trail until it reached the western foot of Lookout Pass. Although it was not mentioned in the written orders, Smith's report indicates that Simpson had instructed him to leave the outbound trail at this point and turn south "up a ravine which leads into Johnston's Pass from the south, and furnishes a path thence into the ravine of Brewer's Spring and Creek."⁴ From where he left the outbound trail to where he reached Brewer's Spring, Smith would be opening up a new section of trail that would replace the section that climbed over the Sheeprock Mountains. Rejoining the return trail at Brewer's Spring, Smith followed it to Old Riverbed, where Camp 32-E had been located. From that point, Smith's trail becomes much less certain. One thing that is clear, however, is that he left the trail that the expedition had followed out of the interior of Keg Mountain. In his report he indicated that on the night of August 8 he had camped near the site of Camp 32-E. After spending most of the following day in an unsuccessful attempt to find several mules that had wandered away, he took up his assigned journey again.

*I followed your trail for about a mile and a half, and then diverged from it to the right. Our road now lay through the range of hills in which Indian Spring is situated, and was necessarily somewhat tortuous, though its general direction was nearly correct. I halted when the moon set (about midnight), and continued the march on the morning of the 10th. We soon emerged from the hills and moved west of south across the valley west of Good Indian Spring, reaching Marmaduke Spring about 3 P.M.*⁵

By moving away from the old trail toward the right, it appears that Smith must have skirted the northern base of Keg Mountain rather than following the expedition's trail through its interior. Smith seems to be describing the foothills on the north side of Keg Mountain, and then the valley that lies between Keg Mountain and the Thomas Mountains. This route would have taken him to the area just north of Mount Laird in the Drum Mountains. Here he found Marmaduke Spring, and spent some time in an attempt to develop the springs into a reliable source of water. His report indicates that he felt this effort was mostly unsuccessful.

*We found here, by digging, sufficient water for our immediate wants, but the holes soon ceased to fill up, and the water gave out entirely before night. It seemed evident to me, on examination of the locality, that the supposed spring at this point was nothing more than a reservoir of rain-water, retained in a natural basin of rocks and protected from evaporation by the sand which fills the basin.*⁶

The next morning Smith headed in a westerly direction through the Drum Mountains and across Whirlwind Valley to Mud Springs. Here he made some improvements to the spring and spent the night. On August 12, he started back toward Camp Floyd but this time he did go into the interior of Keg Mountain, where he spent that night and the next at Keg Spring. Here he left the water troughs that had been intended for Marmaduke Spring. On August 15, he left Good Indian Spring and made it all the way back to Camp Floyd.

Simpson remained at Camp Floyd for only six days following his return. He must have spent most of that time getting things in order for his return trip to Fort Leavenworth, but while still at Camp Floyd, he learned that a number of emigrants were planning to travel on his newly explored route to California. At least some of them were planning to use his return route.

August 6, Camp Floyd.—A party of California emigrants, with seven wagons, take, also, my return-route. I have furnished them with an itinerary.

August 7, Camp Floyd.—An emigrant train of about thirty wagons passed through to-day, taking my more southern route to California. Supplied them with an itinerary.

August 8, Camp Floyd.—Gave Dr. Hobbs, agent of Russell & Co., an itinerary of my inward route. He intends to send immediately over it a thousand head of cattle to California.⁷

Charles Tuttle was traveling with the first group that Simpson mentioned. His journal described what occurred while his party was at Camp Floyd.

Saturday August 6....There had a party just arrived from California. They came a new route which they say is about 250 miles nearer than the old mail route. There was a company of 14 wagons (commanded by Capt Simpson) which had just arrived being the only ones that had come this route. Capt Simpson very kindly offered to let us have an Indian guide to lead us to the right road we gratefully accepted his offer and accordingly he sent one along.⁸

Following the route that Lieutenant Smith had taken, the Tuttle party got onto the return trail at Brewer's Spring, and caught up with Smith where he was camped in Old Riverbed. Traveling just behind Smith, they helped in his efforts to improve the water source at Marmaduke, or Big Horn, Spring, then followed him to Mud Spring. At that point, Smith turned around and the Tuttle party continued westward along the return route.

Another emigrant party, of which Simpson seems to have been unaware, left Camp Floyd on August 14. This was a loosely organized group that included Edward Mathews, who was traveling as a paid passenger in some sort of coach-type wagon that was owned and driven by a Mr. Read of Salt Lake City. The actual number in this group is unknown, but in his journal, Mathews mentions thirty-three other persons. This group followed Simpson's return route all the way to the southwest corner of Carson Lake, then left it to go north to Ragtown, where they got onto the California Trail.⁹

Simpson's return did not go unnoticed by the local press. Probably under the direction of General Johnston, Simpson sent a press release to the *Deseret News* and the *Valley Tan*, newspapers that were being published in Salt Lake City. This release described the route and announced that John Reese was prepared to guide parties of emigrants to Carson Valley.

NOTICE

*To California Emigrants and
Citizens of Utah Territory*

The undersigned is informed that there are many persons at Salt Lake City, destined for California, who are in doubt as to the route they should take. He would inform all such, that by direction of Genl. Johnston, he has within the past three months, explored and surveyed two new routes to California, either of which is about 300 miles shorter than the Old Humboldt, or St. Mary's river route; and from all he can hear and has read, incomparably better in respect to wood, water, and grass. Indeed, by this route the Great Salt Lake desert is entirely avoided, and grass and water may be said to abound, except at few points....

Mr. John Reese, of Genoa, and his son, have just come over the route with me, and will be enabled, and are ready, to conduct any parties of emigrants or herds of animals which may be heading towards California. The young man will doubtless be in the city at the time this notice appears, and Mr. John Reese in the course of about 12 days, as soon as he returns from an expedition under the direction of Lieut. J. L. K. Smith, top'l engineer, who has been charged by General Johnston with the duty of improving the direction of the road within the last one hundred miles, and establishing troughs at a particular spring.

The undersigned is confident that this route will be found from 25 to 50 per cent better than the Old Humboldt River route, and particularly fine for stock driving. It has also the advantage of being a later fall and earlier spring route.

He will, as soon as Lieut. Smith returns, have an itinerary of the route prepared, setting forth the distances between the camping places, and where wood, grass and water can be found, and will send

it to the papers of the Territory for publication. This itinerary it would be well for emigrants and others interested in the route to procure and keep.

J. H. Simpson,
Capt. Corps Top'l Engrs.
Camp Floyd, U. T.
August 7th, 1859¹⁰

A second announcement from Simpson was dated August 7, and published by the *Deseret News* on August 27.

TO CALIFORNIA EMIGRANTS AND THE CITIZENS OF UTAH TERRITORY The undersigned is informed that there are many persons at Salt Lake City destined for California, who are in doubt as to the route they should take. He would inform all such, that by direction of General Johnston, he has within the past three months, explored and surveyed two new routes to California, either of which is about 300 miles shorter than the old Humboldt or St. Mary's River route; and, from all he can hear and has read, is comparably better in respect to wood, water, and grass. Indeed by this route, the Great Salt Lake Desert is entirely avoided, except at a few points. The best route is that from Camp Floyd, through General Johnston's Pass, and thence along the rim between the Great Salt Lake Desert and the General Johnston and Hastings Pass road. J. H. Simpson, Capt. Corps Top'l Eng'rs, Camp Floyd, U. T.¹¹

Although George Chorpenning was struggling to keep his mail business going, he was very much aware that Simpson had found a new route between the south foot of the Ruby Mountains and Carson Valley. For the past year, his mail route had turned to the northwest from the foot of the Rubies to join the Humboldt River route at Gravelly Ford. It would have been shortly after Simpson's return to Camp Floyd that Chorpenning began making plans to adopt the new route. By early in 1860, a number of new stations had been built, or were under construction, along this central route, and the switch had been made.¹² However, Chorpenning did not get to make use of this route for long. Within a few months, a new postmaster general had canceled his contract, and the mail route, along with all

his assets and facilities, was taken over by Russell, Majors, and Waddell, who began operating the Overland Mail and soon initiated their grand experiment, the Pony Express.

Within a year following the expedition, emigrant traffic on the outbound trail had increased to the point that the army was ordered to begin providing these travelers some protection. In May of 1860, an army patrol, under the command of Lt. Stephen H. Weed, began escorting parties of California-bound emigrants along the central part of the new trail.¹³

Simpson did not linger at Camp Floyd. Just six days following his return, he was on the road again. His immediate objective was to take a quick look at the country to the south of the Uinta Mountains. He traveled up Provo Canyon, turned to the east, and went as far as the present-day town of Duchesne.¹⁴ Turning around at that point, he retraced his steps back to Heber Valley, turned to the north once again, and resumed his trip back to Fort Leavenworth, arriving there on October 15. Spending just four days at Fort Leavenworth, Simpson departed for Washington, DC and began the work of drawing up the final report of his explorations and surveys in the West.

Not everyone was happy to hear about the new wagon route. There were many who, for various reasons, felt that it would be a serious mistake for California-bound emigrants to use this new, and so far unproven, route instead of the well-established Humboldt River route. Perhaps some of the Simpson route detractors may have been thinking about the disaster that had occurred when the Donner-Reed party made their decision to follow the Hastings Road. Others had certain vested interests. One of the most vocal, adamant, and influential opponents of Simpson's route was Frederick W. Lander, the superintendent of the federal government's Pacific Wagon Road Office, and the originator of the Lander Cutoff in western Wyoming and eastern Idaho. Lander had surveyed this cutoff himself, and it had been opened to emigrant traffic the previous year.¹⁵ After getting his cutoff opened, he had been spending most of his time and efforts in promoting it to westbound emigrants. He personally met with many emigrants and potential emigrants, distributing pamphlets that contained

road guides featuring his new road. One of his projects was to hire a group of artists to make stereoscopic views of wagon trains, camp scenes, and Indians in full regalia.¹⁶

Lander was in California when he saw the newspaper accounts of the Simpson expedition. The local papers were heaping praise on Simpson and the new route, claiming that it would soon be carrying all of the traffic between the eastern states and the west coast. This was disturbing news and Lander became even more perturbed when he returned to Washington, DC, and learned that the secretary of war's annual report to Congress claimed that Simpson's road was now the shortest and best route between the Missouri River and the Pacific coast. This was just too much for Lander to ignore. After all, he was the duly-appointed head of a federal agency, and he had spent the last three years locating, surveying, and constructing a perfectly good road that would cut something like five days of travel from the Oregon-California Trail. Now here was this upstart army captain, who had taken a three-month jaunt across the desert, urging all California-bound emigrants to leave the federally-sanctioned wagon route and take a chance on an unproven road. He decided to go on the offensive.

First, he prepared and distributed an extensive briefing paper, which attempted to prove that although the new route might be satisfactory for use by the Overland Mail, and maybe the coming telegraph line, it would be an entirely unsatisfactory, and potentially fatal, route for emigrants traveling by wagon.¹⁷

In the meantime, Simpson received a letter from Camp Floyd. It was written by Major Fitz J. Porter, at the direction of General Johnston, and it strongly suggested that Simpson curtail his promotion of the new routes.

Since you left this Department many reports have been received tending, if true, to modify in no slight degree, the favorable impression...that your routes to Genoa would be available for the thousands of emigrants and traders with their vast herds who annually traverse this country to California. A few thousand cattle, in herds, have passed over your return route, and have been followed by small parties of emigrants each having

animals in varying numbers from ten to one hundred. Hearing that some of them later were much inconvenienced on account of the scarcity of grass and water (the springs in some places having been exhausted by a small number of animals), and had to make long marches without either. The Commanding General sent an officer of experience whose judgment could be relied upon, to examine the road and report upon its character and the resources of the country for supporting of large trains or herds. A copy of his report is enclosed and also extracts from the letters of persons who have passed over the road. This officer confirms as far as he went the reports which caused his journey and his own impressions of the kind of travel, are confirmed by other reports and by parties which have just passed over your return route. These last say that the cattle have nearly denuded the country of grass and that water is in many places, not abundant.... The Commanding General does not doubt that the routes assessed by you are of real value for military and mail purposes and for the ordinary travel of this country, especially early in the summer and late in the fall—for those who may winter in this country or be late in arriving. They can be advantageously used by parties of emigrants having a small number of animals, and, should the emigration be greatly reduced, these routes will probably be used in preference to, and, perhaps to the exclusion of those generally traveled. Time will prove if they will sustain a large travel; but until the country becomes more opened and its resources prove abundant, the General desires that no efforts be made to turn the main tide of emigration from Lander's road, north of this Territory.¹⁸

The last sentence seems to be suggesting rather forcefully that Simpson make no more public statements that would lead emigrants to believe that either of the two new routes would be better than the Humboldt River route. I have not found any indication of a direct response to either Porter or Johnston, but Simpson did refer to Porter's letter when he made a public response to comments made by Lander a few weeks later.¹⁹ Although no evidence has been found to support such a speculation, one has to wonder if Lander had anything to do with Johnston's decision to have the letter written.

Lander's next step was to write a lengthy letter to Simpson, asking him if he agreed with a number of recently published statements that described the new route in very complimentary terms. Lander warned Simpson that before he responded, he should consider the fact that "these reports will cause the less experienced emigrants to take your road," then added, "the question is, are you ready to advocate it as suitable for ox-team emigration?"²⁰

Simpson responded to Lander's letter with measured diplomacy,

*Be assured that it has been the farthest thing from my mind to do injustice to you, or anyone else, in what I may have reported of the explorations I have recently made between the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada; and that it shall be my pleasure to set the matter right before the public as soon as practicable.*²¹

For some reason, Simpson felt that this statement did not go far enough, and on February 8, 1860, he sent a press release to the editor of the *Washington Constitution*.

From motives, as I trust, of public good, and desire to do justice to officers of government who have been zealously and efficiently engaged in works of public benefit, I beg leave to make the following statement: It has been made known to the public by the honorable Secretary of War, and the press has given currency to the fact, that during the past year, by authority of the honorable Secretary and the instructions of General Johnston, commanding the Department of Utah, I have opened two new wagon roads from Camp Floyd to California, either of which, in connection with the South Pass or Lieutenant Bryan's road from the Missouri river, forms a highway which is shorter to Sacramento or San Francisco than any other known route.

From data obtained in Utah, it was believed that the difference in favor of my routes was very much greater than is now known to exist; and it was only after I had made a report to the honorable Secretary, on my return to this city, that, the last year's report of Mr. Albert E. Campbell, general superintendent of Pacific wagon roads under the Secretary of the Interior, was placed in my hands.

By this report and the statement of distances which Mr. Campbell has furnished me, I find that very considerable improvements have been made in the old route between the South Pass and the City of Rocks by Mr. F. W. Lander, in the location and construction of a new road, which avoids the Artemisia barrens of the Green River basin with its deleterious waters; the rugged defiles of Wahsatch mountains leading to Salt Lake City, and the circuitous route by the valley of the Bear river.

As these are very important advantages to the heavy ox-migration trains which annually pass over the plains, and which can only accrue on my route after reaching Fort Bridger, and then are intermitted to a degree at the outset of my routes from Camp Floyd, and then again near Carson Lake, albeit between these points there is an abundance of grass and water, it is very possible that emigrants desiring to travel through to California without passing through Great Salt Lake City or Camp Floyd, for purposes of replenishing supplies, or other reasons, would do best to take the Lander cut-off at the South Pass and keep the old road along the Humboldt river.

In thus speaking, however, I do not wish it to be understood that I am in any degree disparaging my routes from Camp Floyd, for it was the decided opinion of the two guides I had with me, and who had been over the Humboldt river road—one of them, Colonel Reese, having several times driven stock over it—and who were, therefore, competent to make a comparison, that my routes were, in respect to wood, water, and grass, very much superior to the old route; and others who have since passed over the routes have reported the same thing. But still there have been reports to the effect that, in consequence of the deficiency of water and grass at some points of the routes, they are not calculated for heavy trans and large herds of cattle, and I cannot, therefore, take the responsibility of diverting the thousands who annually pass over the continent with their immense trains and herds of cattle from the old road, improved as it has been by Mr. Lander between the South Pass and the City of Rocks. Time can only settle which is the best route to the traveling public; and to that arbiter do I leave the decision; only feeling desirous that that route which furnishes the greatest facilities may, as it will, be eventually taken.

There is, however, no question, that for emigrants who may find it necessary to pass through Great Salt Lake City or Camp Floyd, or tarry in that country during the winter, my routes will be found to be much the nearest to Sacramento and San Francisco, and probably the best in other respects; and that in consequence of their being the shortest and situated in a lower and milder region in the winter than the old road, they are the best for the transportation of the mail.

*J. H. Simpson
Captain Topographical Engineers²²*

Frederick Lander must have been at least somewhat mollified by Simpson's public statement, because it seems that he dropped the matter at this point.

As Simpson worked on the report of the expedition, the events that eventually led to the Civil War were intensifying. At about the same time that the work was finished, the conflict between the North and South had begun, and the report was essentially put aside for the duration. Following the end of the war, there seemed to be little interest in wagon roads. Everyone was now talking about the transcontinental railroad, and publication of the report was again delayed. Finally, in 1876, Congress authorized its publication.

Simpson remained in the Union Army, and saw action in a number of battles. During a skirmish at Gaines' Mill in June 1862, he was taken prisoner and held in Richmond until sometime in August, when he was released as part of a routine prisoner exchange.²³ Shortly after the end of the Civil War, he was awarded the honorary rank of brevet brigadier general and transferred to the Department of Interior, assigned to the position of the department's chief engineer. His responsibilities included oversight of the construction of railroads, and the administration of all government wagon roads.²⁴ He retired from the army in 1880, and died in 1883.

In a master's thesis written in 1949, Wilbur Sheridan Warrick included the following comment about Simpson and his career.

James Hervey Simpson has never been given a place of particular importance in the history of the United States. He did not have a flare for publicity

and did not have those romantic characteristics of eccentricities that attract attention. He did not become a popular figure like John Charles Frémont of the Topographical Engineers or Benjamin L. E. Bonneville and Randolph B. Marcy of the Infantry. He was, however, an enthusiastic participant in the opening of the West. He thought of his road surveying and wagon road building not just as a job in hand but as a part of a great transcontinental conquering of rocks and deserts and mountains and valleys in the interest of making the states and territories into a united nation. He thought of his work in shortening overland routes to California not only as an engineering achievement but as a part of a program to bring the West closer to the East.... He was not only a military engineer. He was also a man of historical vision.²⁵

J. L. Kirby Smith and Haldiman S. Putnam served with the Union Army during the Civil War and lost their lives in battle. Smith was killed during the battle of Corinth on October 4, 1862. Putnam received fatal wounds in the assault of Fort Wagner in South Carolina on July 18, 1863.²⁶ Albert Sidney Johnston became a general in the Confederate Army and was killed on April 6, 1862, while leading a charge during the battle of Shiloh.²⁷

During my travels along Simpson's route, and in getting to and from the various sections that I needed to explore, I have driven approximately 30,000 miles. While hiking the sections that I could not get to in my vehicle, I have covered about 140 miles of Simpson's trail on foot. But because of the fact that I usually had to return to where I had started, I ended up walking almost the same number of miles to get back to my vehicle. I am quite certain that I have been either directly on, or within a few yards of, the entire route. I have visited and have taken photographs and GPS readings at what I believe are all of the seventy different campsites. Although it would be foolhardy of me to claim that I have always discovered the exact spots upon which the members of the expedition pitched their tents, I do feel that I have gotten reasonably close. A project that started out as idle curiosity has taken ten years to complete, and has introduced me to many other historical trails that are crying out to be explored.