



PROJECT MUSE®

Exploring Desert Stone

Steven K. Madsen

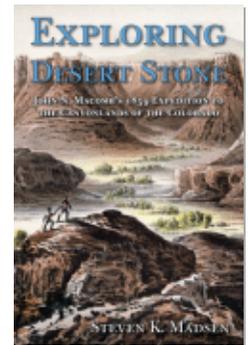
Published by Utah State University Press

Madsen, Steven K.

Exploring Desert Stone: John N. Macomb's 1859 Expedition to the Canyonlands of the Colorado.

Utah State University Press, 2010.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/9852.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9852>



THE EXPEDITION'S AFTERMATH

At journey's end, much work remained for the men of the Macomb expedition as they prepared for their homeward travel. The Army required Macomb to settle his accounts before he returned to Washington. In addition to selling off surplus provisions and equipment to balance the books, he needed to assemble a wagon train and arrange for a military escort to accompany him to Fort Leavenworth. He anticipated that all of his civil employees would accompany him on his homebound path, but two sought to convince the captain that they needed to travel a faster and, seemingly, less dangerous route home. Meanwhile, Macomb and his men faced the “hurry and wait” routine of military life.

Soon after his arrival in Santa Fé, Macomb expedited a letter to the War Department reporting “the safe return of my party to this place, from the Exploration of the Rio San Juan &c.”¹ On September 30, he wrote his wife, “You will rejoice with me that I am once more safely on the East Side of the Rio Bravo Grande del Norte! I reached Santa Fé on the day before yesterday having been absent just eleven weeks.”² Macomb continued, “I am now surrounded by the luggage & am more or less disturbed by the process of packing and unpacking & occasional calls upon me for money &c to say nothing of my anxiety to sell the animals & other property we have used on the expedition.”³

In Santa Fé Dimmock drew his salary and promptly sent funds home to Emmy. He grew increasingly impatient for home: “Feel fidgety as possible.

-
1. Macomb to Humphreys, October 3, 1859, NA.
 2. John Macomb to “Nannie” Macomb, September 30, 1859, LOC.
 3. Ibid.

Can[']t remain ten minutes in one place. Fact is I want to go home & can[']t endure this delay.”⁴

Perhaps to help pass the time, Dimmock retraced for Macomb “a wretched map of the surveys (land) executed in this Territory up to last January.” (William Pelham, New Mexico’s surveyor general, may have drawn the original map.) In addition, he spent time visiting local merchants James Johnson and Joseph “Joe” Mercure. From Johnson, Dimmock procured a set of earrings for his wife. Mercure and his brother, Henry, operated a store in town. In addition, Mercure had helped Newberry acquire several minerals and ores, including *chalchuitl*—“a variety of turquoise”—for the Ives expedition, which Newberry acknowledged in his final report.⁵

The War Department directed Macomb, on his “return to Santa Fé to reduce my party and come in to Washington to prepare my report.”⁶ Macomb began at once packing the expedition’s instruments and specimens for shipment to Washington. His civil assistants engaged in packing trunks and repacking the geological specimens for the long haul.

Macomb lost no time in selling the expedition’s mules and other property to balance their finances. To settle his accounts as fiscal agent, he sold at public auction and private sales “property belonging to the appropriations for ‘Surveys for Military Defences &c.’” This included burros (\$20 each), U.S. army trousers for mounted troops (\$4.92 a pair), spurs (\$1.10 a pair), lariats (\$1 each), saddles (\$6 each), rifles (\$5 each), screwdriver (46 ¢), canteen (48 ¢), bootees or army footwear (\$1.88 a pair), screw-top tin cans (50 ¢ each), and several apothecary items including mercurial ointment, Epsom salts, adhesive plaster, citric acid, iodine, camphor, arsenic, and opium. (Opium was used to treat diarrhea and dysentery.)⁷

The Army scrimped on virtually every expense, including salaries. Prior to the expedition, Judge Joab Houghton had been Captain Macomb’s principal road construction assistant, receiving little remuneration for his yeoman efforts. Macomb petitioned the government to grant him better wages, to no avail. Judge Houghton left to strike it rich in the Pike’s Peak gold rush. Following the expedition, Dimmock learned that Houghton had returned from the placer mines with “a little gold.”⁸

Back in Santa Fé, far from the gold fields, Dimmock witnessed a wealth of degradation at the Fonda Hotel. Fighting, drinking, gambling and prostitution abounded within its walls. “To get drunk[,] gamble & fornicate

4. Dimmock, Diary, September 29, 1859, VHS.

5. Ibid., October 1, 1859, VHS.

6. Macomb, *Report*, 7.

7. “The United States in ac. with J. N. M. for San Juan Exploration,” Letterbook, pages 74–75, [Macomb’s accounts for 3rd quarter, 1859], NA.

8. Dimmock, Diary, October 6, 1859, VHS; Macomb to Col. J. J. Abert, September 29, 1858, Letters Received, Bureau of Topographical Engineers, War Department Records, NA.

seems absolutely the only duties of four-fifths of those who board here, at the Fonda." He was horrified by the "advances in the complicated forms of sinning as are here to be found. Plain sin is esteemed puerile & contemptible." Cogswell repeatedly overimbibed and called on Dimmock in his hotel room, much to his chagrin. Longing for home one night, Dimmock retired for bed "blue & miserable."⁹

Newberry seemingly felt the same way, although he continued to actively study the complicated geological structure of the area surrounding Santa Fé. He wrote, "The three months spent in the vicinity of Santa Fé during the past season by our party have . . . not been entirely without value."

Some highlights from Newberry's geological report reveal his efforts both before and after the expedition in confronting head-on the geology in the area of Santa Fé. Nevertheless, he confessed that "many questions are left unsettled." He reported, "Though I have examined outcrops of granite in many thousand different localities, I have never seen even a hand[-sized] specimen similar in character to the red granite of the Rocky Mountains." In the Santa Fe Mountains he found "bright brick-red" granite. He also found "light-colored, grey or white" granite in the same mountains. Furthermore, "veins of quartz and epidote are very common in the granite." In the region immediately about Santa Fé, Newberry also observed "repositories of . . . copper, lead, silver, and gold."

The Santa Fe Mountains, he observed, appeared "comparatively short" next to "most of the ranges" of the Rockies. The mountains extended possibly fifty or sixty miles to the north. On the south, the Santa Fe Range "falls off abruptly near Santa Fé" and is "represented at a distant point by some of the mountain chains which lie east of the Rio Grande." Among the mountain chains to the south stood the Sandia and Placer mountains.

The Los Cerrillos represented "a group of hills or small mountains between Santa Fé and the Placer Mountains, on the north side of Galisteo Creek," Newberry explained. The mountains appeared eruptive in nature. He discovered "many old mines worked by the Spaniards or Indians." The mines contained "gold, silver, lead, copper, iron, and turquoise or 'chalchuitl.'" The turquoise minerals "are rather abundant, but most of it is of inferior quality," he wrote. "I have seen ornaments of it worn by the Apache, Mohaves, the Navajoes [*sic*] and Pueblos, and so highly prized that a fragment of fine quality no larger than the nail of one's little finger and one-eighth of an inch in thickness was regarded as worth a mule or a good horse."

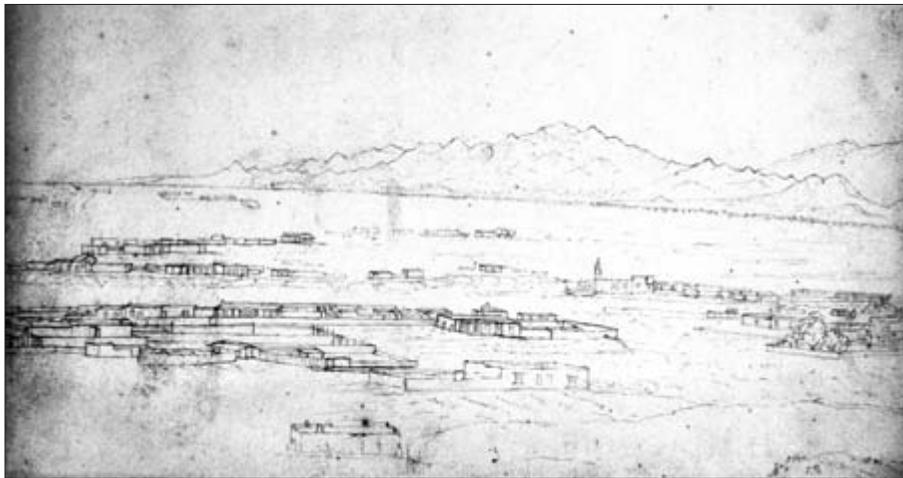
After much fieldwork, Newberry finally ended his geological studies of the Santa Fé district. Eager to get home, he and Dimmock pleaded

9. Dimmock, Diary, October 6, 1859, VHS.



Photo by author

Santa Fé's present La Fonda bears no resemblance to the original one-story Fonda, or Exchange Hotel.



Charles Dimmock Papers, Special Collections Research Center, College of William and Mary

A rare nineteenth century view of Santa Fé, New Mexico, by Charles H. Dimmock.

with Macomb to grant them an early departure by stagecoach, rather than traveling back east in a slow wagon caravan accompanied by troops. Macomb ultimately consented.

Before their departure, Dimmock met with Pfeiffer and Nepomuceno and a delegation of Ute leaders—from the Muache, Tabuache, and Capote Ute bands, which included “Tamuche (the rascal).” Quoting Pfeiffer, Dimmock buttressed his view of Temuché: “‘Tamuche [*sic*] has a big conscience—a six horse team could turn in it.’ By this he means an entire want of honesty—a pliable conscience.” Following the parley, Dimmock presented gifts to both Pfeiffer and Nepomuceno.¹⁰

After bidding farewell to his associates, Dimmock embarked on his homeward journey, accompanying Newberry on the Eastern Mail Stage. Initially, they took the route up the Santa Fe Trail, but Indian hostilities beyond Pecos forced their return. Dimmock “learned that 20 miles on our road a band of robbers (one American & six Mexicans) have been committing general outrages.”

Worried that the stage from the East had failed to make its required connection with the outbound stage, Dimmock wrote, “Nothing now remains but for us to return to Santa Fé & await further developments.”

Four days later, Dimmock and Newberry boarded the Southern Mail Stage crowded with judges and lawyers bound for El Paso, via the historic “Jornada del Muerto” route. Included in the group was Judge John S. Watts’s son, John, and Jimmy Edgar, John’s new brother-in-law. (At a stage rest stop, Edgar offered fellow passengers some leftover cake from his sister’s recent wedding to John’s brother, Joshua Howe Watts.)¹¹

Crowded together on the stage, it appears that Dimmock borrowed a book from young Watts, *Pendennis*, by William Makepeace Thackeray. Another book he read on his homeward journey was *Life of Baron Trenck*. He also “tried a specimen of yellow covered literature but abandoned it in disgust before reading 40 pages.”¹²

Three hundred fifty-two miles from Santa Fé, the passengers reached El Paso. On his arrival, Dimmock decided to visit “Old El Paso, in Chihuahua, Mexico.” He noted: “The town not much, but country around beautiful. Vineyards for miles around but hardly tended. Would make as fine a wine country as any in Europe.” He subsequently bought four bottles of *Vino di Carlow*, which he shared with Newberry. (We learn from young John Watts that his father also procured two bottles of the local wine for a friend in Ohio.)¹³

10. *Ibid.*, October 7, 1859, VHS.

11. *Ibid.*, October 19, 1859, VHS; Remley, “*Adios Nuevo Mexico*,” 201–203, 212, 215–16.

12. Dimmock, *Diary*, October 20, 28, 30, 1859, VHS; Remley, “*Adios Nuevo Mexico*,” 7.

13. Dimmock, *Diary*, October 23, November 1, 1859, VHS; Remley, “*Adios Nuevo Mexico*,” 216.

*Photo by author*

The Pecos mission church ruins in Pecos National Historical Park, New Mexico.

Dropping to sleep one night on his “grid iron” bed, or “Guatamozin’s couch of agony,” Dimmock overheard a girl singing outside. “[I] was aroused by the sweetest voice, in a placito adjoining, gushing in strains of the wildest melancholy—Softly trembling as with the last cadence of a forsaken Dove or swelling with the power of pain pressed Philomela.”

Sleepless nights seemed the least of Dimmock’s concerns. Beyond El Paso, potential dangers loomed on the horizon. Raiding parties threatened to disrupt their overland journey. Although the Army had built a chain of military posts along the two routes leading east from El Paso to safeguard overland traffic, frontier forces failed to discourage attacks on travelers. Moreover, the frequent sensational stories from stage drivers haunted the traveling public.

One driver from San Antonio arrived without passengers and claimed that “1300 Indians on the Stake Plains . . . refuse to permit passage of the overland Stage & . . . the passengers are all collected at one of the Stations fearing to go on.” Two days later, another driver told “of one Station of mules having been run off by the Comanches since the passing of the last mail.”

On the next leg of their homeward journey, Dimmock and Newberry chose to take the “lower road,” a presumably safer way, on the San Antonio

to El Paso route. After spending 25¢ to ferry the Rio Grande, they each paid \$100 to travel “to New Orleans from El Paso,” via San Antonio. The first day proved wretched. Their stagecoach “was upset,” and Dimmock found himself “undermost” the other passengers. “Fortunately no one injured,” he added. At one of the stage stops, Dimmock wrote: “Meal oh! most miserable, but 50¢ for everything.” That night the station failed to provide passengers with any beds, so Dimmock “spread [him]self on the counter of a [sixpenny] store & went to sleep.”

On the rest of the trip of six hundred miles, they fared better. The road took them across the southern stretch of the Llano Estacado desert plateau and over the colorful Wild Rose Pass. They stopped at stage stations and at several U.S. Infantry posts—Fort Quitman, Fort Davis, Fort Lancaster, Fort Hudson, and Fort Clark.

Arriving at San Antonio, Dimmock described the city as “a strag[g]ling mixture of Stone[,] frame & adobe buildings. Some of the buildings constructed of a drab limestone are striking & architectural.” In his diary, he made a random note of the frontier artist/photographer “W. H. Jackson, San Antonio, Texas.”¹⁴

On the distant horizon beyond San Antonio, Dimmock and Newberry faced the possibility of more trouble. Juan Cortina (1824–1894) and his militant force had recently raided and captured Brownsville in retaliation for racist violence against local Texas Hispanics. Turmoil seemed likely to spread to other parts of Texas and engulf the region in bloodshed. (Cortina’s war against Anglo racism ultimately launched his legendary fame.)¹⁵

Dimmock and Newberry chose an indirect course eastward from San Antonio by passing Cortina’s uprising. They traveled by stage to Indianola, Texas, where they boarded the steamer *Matagorda*. (*Matagorda* later played a minor role in the Civil War, when it became a “blockade runner.”) On board the paddle wheeler they wiled away the time playing cards as they navigated the Gulf Coast to Berwick’s Bay via the wharf at Galveston. Both men avoided entering the city, which was in the grip of a yellow fever epidemic. Riding on the New Orleans and Appaloosas Railroad, they reached New Orleans, where they boarded and dined at the historic St. Charles Hotel.

From New Orleans, they resumed their eastward journey on the New Orleans and Jackson Railroad. Near Canton, Mississippi, they were forced

14. Dimmock, *Diary*, November Bills Payable and entries October 31–November 9, 1859, VHS.

15. *Ibid.*, November 13 1859, VHS; “Juan Cortina (1824–1892),” PBS: The West, http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/a_c/cortina.html (accessed December 29 2007); Sonal Panse, “The Robinhood of the Rio Grande,” <http://www.buzzle.com/editorials/5-8-2004-53894.asp> (accessed December 29, 2007).



Courtesy of Margaret Jones Perritt

Charles H. Dimmock in Richmond, Virginia, ca. 1861. Photo by C. R. Rees.

to take a stage to Duck Hill station on the Mississippi Central Railroad. From Duck Hill, they traveled to Grand Junction, Tennessee, where they parted company. Newberry took the Mobile and Ohio to Cairo, Illinois, and beyond, and Dimmock continued his zigzag course homeward.

Arriving at Stevenson, Alabama, Dimmock reached the terminus of the Mississippi Central and boarded “the Eastern going train,” the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, which passed through Chattanooga toward Knoxville, Tennessee. Beyond Knoxville, he continued to Bristol, where he took the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad to Lynchburg. From Lynchburg, he took the “South Side cars” to the Danville Railroad Junction via Farmville, crossing the famous landmark, High Bridge, over the Appomattox River. At the railroad junction, he changed cars and moved on to Richmond, Virginia, where he stopped to visit his parents “at the Armory at tea” and to send a telegraph to his wife. Three days later, on November 22, he arrived home in Baltimore.¹⁶

16. Dimmock, Diary, “Memoranda” and entry for November 19, 1859, VHS.

Not long after his arrival in Baltimore, it seems that his wife, Emmy, died in childbirth. However, the baby, christened Emily Moale Dimmock, survived. A widower and the father of two children, Dimmock decided to move to Richmond to be near his parents.¹⁷

In Richmond, Dimmock opened a law office and resumed his legal profession. Influenced in part by his father's military ties to Virginia, Dimmock over time became a Southern sympathizer. (Nevertheless, during his stay in Santa Fé with the Macomb expedition, he had refused to enter into a heated slavery debate among the civil engineers, stating: "[I] took no part [in the debate] as these contests engender ill feeling while the[y] change no one's opinion.")¹⁸

Newberry returned to his home in Cleveland on November 15 "after a long and wearisome journey from Santa Fé by way of El Paso, San Antonio, & New Orleans." He wrote his friend Baird at the Smithsonian, "We had a very pleasant & interesting expedition, and in geology particularly the results exceeded my expectations—In Zoology my efforts were rendered nearly fruitless by the barrenness of the field and the constant rains I fear you will be disappointed in my collections—but I assure you I did my *possible*—I hope to be with you within a month with Capt. Macomb & the collections—He is coming slowly across the plains to Ft. Leavenworth."¹⁹

Before setting off for his home in Washington, D.C., Macomb wrote his wife about his prospects for returning to New Mexico. Said he: "I trust I never shall." He also assured his wife, "We have *guns* and *pistols* enough to make it very uncomfortable for the indians in case they should determine to attack us."²⁰ The U.S. Army had ordered Macomb on his return trip "to stop at the southwest corner of the Territory of Kansas, to set up a new monument at a point some two and a quarter miles to the east of the one originally placed there."

Unaware of the full impact of his work, in mid-November 1859, with twelve men—including Louis Dorsey, Francis Fisher, and James Vail—and a military escort, Macomb veered from the Santa Fe Trail and "erected a rough stone monument" at the intersection of the 37th parallel and "the meridian of 103°." A regiment of thirty-five mounted riflemen and three non-commissioned officers, led by Lt. H. M. Enos, provided his "safe transit to Fort Leavenworth."²¹ Ultimately, Macomb's monument played an important role in the establishment of the boundary between New Mexico and Colorado, later disputed in the U. S. Supreme Court.²²

17. Dimmock, Papers, 1850–1873, Section 11, Obituaries, VHS.

18. Ibid., Dimmock, Diary, June 22, 1859, VHS.

19. Newberry to Baird, November 25, 1859, SIA.

20. John Macomb to "Nannie" Macomb, September 30, October 23, 1859, LOC.

21. Macomb, *Report*, 7–8.

22. U.S. Supreme Court, *State of N. M. v. State of Colo.*, 267 U.S. 30 (1925).



Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. *The Virginiana Fund*. Photo by Katherine Wetzel, © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

High Bridge near Farmville, Virginia

Beyond the Colorado-New Mexico border the train returned to the Santa Fe Trail and made its way to Fort Leavenworth, where Macomb intended to sell his remaining outfit—"to come in out of debt." The Macomb train consisted of two wagons, a carriage, and an "old vehicle I have used here ever since I came with *power* in this country," he quipped. On December 8, 1859, Macomb stopped at the fort and sold twenty-three mules, one bell mare, and harnesses to "Falkerson & Elliott" for \$1,185. Although the fort did not want the wagons he offered, the total sales of property "no longer required for the use of the Exp[editio]n" came to \$3,684.39.²³

Macomb arrived in Washington in mid-December, where he stayed for more than a year to prepare his report of the expedition. He submitted a preliminary report, published by the U.S. Senate, which announced "there is no practicable route from the settlements of New Mexico to those of Utah." Americans were also told that the expedition had made "valuable geographical and other scientific" contributions to mankind's body of knowledge. But unforeseen events would disrupt the writing and publication of the final report.²⁴

23. John Macomb to "Nannie" Macomb, October 23, 1859, LOC; Macomb to "Quartermaster General, U.S. Army, Washington, D.C.," December 22, 1859, NA; "The United States in ac. with J. N. M. for San Juan Exploration," Letterbook, 74-75, [Macomb's accounts for 3rd quarter, 1859], NA.

24. See Capt. A. A. Humphreys, "Report of the Office of Explorations and Surveys," in *Report of the Secretary of War*, Senate Executive Document 1, vol. 2, 36th Cong., 2d sess., serial no. 1079 (Washington, D.C., 1860), 146-52.