South Pass over the Continental Divide is not truly a mountain pass in the romantic sense; it is neither craggy nor treacherous as might be imagined. On the contrary, this gateway in the Wind River country of the Rockies is a gentle twenty-mile saddle easily traversed in season on horseback or by wagon. Because it is no real obstacle to wagons, the pass became integral to the move west that was shaping “in the States” in the 1840s. After the fur-trapping brigades launched their forays across the Rockies, the siren call of California was played with increasing intensity across the pages of Missouri and New York newspapers reporting the adventures of mountaineers and explorers.

California was extolled as a sunny paradise, where land was for the taking and summer was forever. It was a dream to capture a nation’s imagination. When fur companies brought supplies by wagon to trappers at their annual rendezvous, it demonstrated dramatically that wheels could make it across the rugged slopes. Soon the promise of Oregon and a fresh start in new country drew scores of prospective overland travelers to the Western Emigration Society, organized by Missourians to help emigrants prepare for the journey west. Still, there was no clear perception of a wagon route beyond the Rockies. The prevailing mindset was to head for Oregon by way of South Pass and Fort Hall, the Hudson’s Bay Company trading post, and from there west the best way possible, the mountaineers reckoned.

Wagon teams clustering at the Kansas River in May 1841 formed an unsure, insecure group with no discernible leader. One blustering individual, John Bartleson, insisted on being elected captain and threatened to pull out of the enterprise if ignored. Though it was obvious that “Captain” Bartleson knew little more about plains travel than the next man, the emigrants obliged him. Hearing that the famous mountaineer Thomas “Broken Hand” Fitzpatrick was guiding a small contingent of Catholic missionaries to Flathead country in present Montana, the emigrants wisely waited to join them.

When on May 18 the company set out, it was with fifteen wagons and four solid-wheel Red River carts. Counting the Catholics, there were sixty-six men, at least five women, and a few children. With the trail-wise Fitzpatrick pointing the way, they made it to Soda Springs in present Idaho by August. There in the mountain fastness, difficult choices were made. The Catholic missionaries, Jesuit priest Pierre-Jean De Smet among them, continued north to the Flatheads. Bartleson with three others rode to Fort Hall seeking trail information, and thirty-two of the travelers in nine wagons chose to press on for California, moving
John Bidwell, California pioneer and Bidwell-Bartleson party chronicler. Utah State Historical Society.

slowly until Bartleson could overtake them. The rest of the group chose Oregon.

In the California company was John Bidwell, whose daily journal left a record of the experience. History would recognize him by dubbing the nine wagons the Bidwell-Bartleson party. They planned to seek out Cache Valley and there await Bartleson. The company jolted south in the general vicinity of the Bear River, and would by mid-August reach the site of today’s Cornish, Cache County, thus becoming the first emigrant wagon party to travel northern Utah.

During the next few weeks, they wandered desperately, reaching the site of present Smithfield before turning west to what is now Fielding, making a northern loop to cross the Malad River, then veering south again to the future location of Corinne. Here scouts brought word the party was within ten miles of where the Bear River emptied into the Great Salt Lake. Bidwell confided dourly in his journal, “This is the fruit of having no pilot—we pass through cash valley, where we intended to stop and did not know it.”

Bartleson and the three who rode to Fort Hall caught up at the campsite now called Connor Springs. The end of August found the party plodding westward just north of the lake, taking wagons where none had been before. Past Locomotive Springs and through Park Valley they struggled. They had no fresh water; their animals had no grass. On September 6, 1841, Bidwell wrote, “We travelled about 10 miles a day in a southwest direction and camped on a small brook. Today we killed some rabbits and an antelope. Game being scarce here we were compelled to kill oxen.”

A week brought them to yet another milestone in western annals, as Dale L. Morgan described it: “the first immigrant arrival at Pilot Peak.” It was costly. Four years later, John C. Frémont’s pack expedition reached this critical watering hole after a venturesome crossing of the Salt Desert, and in 1846 emigrant companies would stumble here out of the desert as though to salvation itself.

Now a refreshed Bidwell-Bartleson party moved on to the Pequop Range in present Nevada, where, after surviving five months of torturous trail-breaking travel, the remaining wagons were forsaken, their hulks grim guideposts to future emigrants. It was early November before the hardy pioneers actually reached California. Their achievement stirred the nation’s pulse, and before five more years had passed, the move west was on in earnest. The Bidwell-Bartleson route proved too arduous and lengthy, so succeeding emigrant parties would take the Oregon Trail from Soda Springs to Fort Hall, then turn southwest to City of Rocks and follow the California Trail west.

Frémont’s 1843 exploring expedition took him to the Great Salt Lake in the fall. He and a small party including Kit Carson paddled an India rubber boat to an offshore island west of the mouth of the Weber River, where Frémont took topographical readings while Carson amused himself by cutting a cross “under a shelving rock” on the island summit. (When Captain Howard Stansbury surveyed the lake in 1849, he rejected Frémont’s choice of Disappointment Island as a
name, and instead called it Fremont, in tribute to its discoverer.)

Frémont made his way to Sutter's Fort and returned to the States early in 1844. He reached Independence, Missouri, in late July to a hero's welcome. His official Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-'44 was a literary hit as well, and it played a significant role in persuading the Mormons to settle the Great Salt Lake Valley in 1847. But the ever-restless Frémont, now a brevet captain, embarked on his third expedition, which would include the desert west of the Great Salt Lake. This time he camped on the site of Salt Lake City in October 1845, taking observations for latitude and longitude and visiting the largest island in the lake. There he found grass and water and numbers of antelope. "In memory of the grateful supply of food they furnished I gave their name to [Antelope] island."

It was this exploration—its course skirting south of the lake across the Salt Desert to Pilot Peak and on to Sutter's Fort—that spurred Lansford W. Hastings into promoting his theoretical "short-cut" wagon road to California. How Hastings seized on Frémont's achievement to substantiate his own untested speculations and then persuaded emigrant wagon parties to use the route is a compelling drama and tragedy of overland trail history.

Backtracking Frémont through Nevada and Utah, Hastings, with James Hudspeth and a few others, reached the Fort Bridger trading post by the first week in June 1846. In his party was mountaineer James Clyman, an Ashley man who had circumnavigated the Great Salt Lake two decades earlier in a buffalo-skin boat. Hastings had hoped to leave word of his cutoff at the trading post but learned that Jim Bridger had been absent for several weeks. Hastings insisted on waiting, and Clyman was for moving on. They went their separate ways.

Historians Roderic Korns and Dale L. Morgan, writing in West from Fort Bridger, said Hastings chanced upon Wales B. Bonney, a lone traveler from Oregon heading east in the vicinity of South Pass, and used this "providential" circumstance to write an open letter to California-bound travelers. Though no copy of Hastings's letter survives, diarists have provided clues as to the burden of its message. Hastings invited them to concentrate their numbers and strength and to take his new route, which he promised would materially shorten the distance. (In truth, the "cutoff" was almost one hundred miles longer.)

While most of the emigrants elected to take the sure way, Hastings's pitch worked with several parties, among them Edwin Bryant and William H. Russell's mule-pack outfit, the George Harlan-Samuel C. Young wagon company, George and Jacob Donner's party, and James Frazier Reed's wagon company. In all, some seventy-five wagons risked the Hastings Cutoff in 1846. Other overland travelers stayed with the Fort Hall trail to California, which bypassed all of Utah except the extreme northwestern corner.

The Bryant-Russell mule party moved faster than wagons and entered Utah through Thomas Canyon west of today's Evanston, Wyoming. They followed Crane Creek across what is now Deseret Livestock Company land and descended Trail Creek Canyon and Lost Creek to the Weber River near present Croydon, Morgan County. After a futile effort to penetrate Weber Canyon, they backtracked to present Henefer and rode up Main Canyon to Dixie Creek and the floor of East Canyon and then back along an Indian trail to the Weber River about two miles below present Morgan.

The men camped while their guide, James Hudspeth, once more scouted Weber Canyon and reported that he had encountered a train of some forty wagons, with Hastings as guide, at the mouth of Echo Canyon. The pack party broke into the Great Salt Lake Valley above Ogden, turned south, and on July 31 forded the Jordan River where 2700 South in Salt Lake City is today. From that point, they headed their mules due west past the site of Grantsville and across the Salt Desert to the Pilot Peak oasis soon to be known as Donner Spring. Pushing on through present Nevada, the party picked its way across Secret Pass at the north end of the Ruby Mountains, then to Sutter's Fort by August 31, making them the first overland immigrants to California that year.
Back on the trail, the wagon companies were not faring well. The Harlan-Young party and Hastings had managed to overcome the tangled underbrush, trees, and boulders choking Weber Canyon, but not without great difficulty. Once in the valley, they found a ford on the Jordan near today’s North Temple street and crossed over at that point. Before venturing on to the Salt Desert, the company rested at Twenty Wells, so named for its many springs. It is now known as Grantsville. There James Frazier Reed and two others from the struggling Donner wagon train came up and persuaded Hastings to return long enough to show them a better route from the mountains than Weber Canyon.

He rode with them as far as Big Mountain summit in Emigration Canyon and offered his advice regarding a wagon road; then Hastings turned back to rejoin Harlan-Young and the others. After much labor, the Donner-Reed company hacked its way from Big Mountain Pass to Little Mountain and down Emigration Canyon to the valley. It took them a dozen precious days.

From the mouth of Emigration, they crossed the Jordan slightly south of 2700 South to reach Tooele Valley about August 24. Here one of the company, a lone traveler named Luke Halloran, who had joined them at Fort Bridger, died of tuberculosis. In his last days, he had been cared for by Tamsen Donner, and it was to her he left his property, $1,500. Halloran, a Master Mason, was buried near John Hargrave, who succumbed to typhoid pneumonia two weeks earlier at the Harlan-Young camp. Hargrave thus became the first overland emigrant laid to rest in Utah soil and Halloran the first Mason buried in Utah. Neither gravesite has been located.

More hardship was in store for the wagon parties. The Salt Desert extracted a cruel toll. What the emigrants expected to be a forty-mile drive without grass and water was twice that distance. Some families lost oxen, wagons, and personal belongings in the unforgiving and brutal terrain. Finally at then Pilot Spring, the emigrants were in truly critical straits. Farther west they would be thwarted at Secret Pass, which they found impassable by wagon. Forcing an eighty-mile detour around the southern tip of the Ruby Mountains to intercept the California Trail, this prolonged drive made the Hastings Cutoff no
shortcut. Indeed, it was considerably longer than the Fort Hall road it was to supersede.

The Harlan-Young company was the last wagon train to safely cross the Sierra Nevada ahead of the Donner-Reed party. The Donners’ tragic tale of being trapped late in the season in the high mountains during the ferocious winter of 1846–47, with its spectre of starvation and cannibalism, is one of the darkest chapters in the annals of overland travel.

Yet the trail they carved by toil and tears in the wilderness to the Great Salt Lake Valley would become a wagon highway. For in April 1847, even as the Donner survivors were being rescued, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prepared to set out from Winter Quarters in Nebraska to seek their promised valley in the Rockies.
Emigrant trails across Utah. Map by Mark Knudsen and Dennis Green, the *Salt Lake Tribune.*