



Chimney Rock on the Oregon Trail

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: Travelers' many journal references and sketches show the significance of Chimney Rock. No other landmark was more memorable or excited the viewers' imagination more.

Note: a complete list of travelers' references to major Oregon Trail landmarks 1830-1866 and a Chimney Rock bibliography follow the article.

Cataloging Information:

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CHIMNEY ROCK ON THE OREGON TRAIL

BY MERRILL J. MATTES

I

THERE are dozens of "Chimney Rocks" in the United States, but there is only one "Chimney Rock on the Oregon Trail." The "Chimney Rock" referred to in literally hundreds of surviving overland journals and diaries is a unique landmark, on the south or "Oregon Trail" side, opposite the north bank or "Mormon Trail" side, of the North Platte River, in western Nebraska.

This landmark lies in the southwest quarter of Sec. 17, T. 20 N., R. 52 W. of the 6th Principal Meridian, near the eastern edge of Morrill County, about three and one-half miles southwest of Bayard, and about twenty-three miles east of Scotts Bluff National Monument. It is viewed annually by thousands of people following the south bank of the river, via U. S. Highway 26, joining State Highway 86, south of the river, or U. S. 26-N north of the river. Blase' travelers in high speed automobiles are less given to keeping diaries, and less apt to go into raptures over North Platte Valley scenery than their ancestors traveling via ox-drawn covered wagons. Nevertheless, Chimney Rock is still a striking phenomenon, eliciting much comment.

Chimney Rock is a slender column upon a conical base, standing apart from the principal ridge which bounds the North Platte Valley. The Camp Clarke Quadrangle of the U. S. Geological Survey, based on a survey of 1895, shows its

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summit about five hundred feet above the river and perhaps three hundred feet from the base of the cone. No present scientific measurements of the column or spire are available, but it appears to rise about one hundred feet above the peak of the cone.

The Rock, referred to as "marl" or "earthy limestone" by the emigrants, is composed of Brule clay, with interlayers of volcanic ash and Arickaree sandstone. It is the presence of the latter formation in the upper strata which probably accounts for the strange resistance of this column to weathering after the surrounding clay has long since eroded, leaving it detached from the main ridge. The same geological principle is demonstrated in somewhat less striking fashion at Scotts Bluff.¹

II

The greatest migration corridor in American history is that which follows the Platte River through present Nebraska-Wyoming.² To Lewis and Clark and to the earliest fur traders the big navigable Missouri River was the only geographically logical route westward. The returning Astorians in 1812-13 discovered the easy gradient of South Pass across the continental backbone, and the logic of a central overland route, down the Sweetwater, the North Platte, and the Platte Rivers to the vicinity of Grand Island, thence by a variety of routes to the Missouri. The route was pioneered by Thomas Fitzpatrick and fellow traders in 1824. Thenceforward it was the principal avenue of commerce to the successive wilderness rendezvous of the fur trade at various points in the Rocky Mountains.

Wheeled vehicles of the Smith-Jackson-Sublette expedition of 1830 were the first to follow this route westward; those of Captain Bonneville in 1832 were the first to reach

¹N. H. Darton, *Scotts Bluff Folio*, U.S.G.S. Atlas No. 87; William L. Effinger, *Outline of the Geology and Paleontology of Scotts Bluff National Monument*, National Park Service (Berkeley, 1934); J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1911), I, 82-84.

²General references include W. J. Ghent, *The Road to Oregon* (New York, 1929); Jay Monaghan, *The Overland Trail* (Indianapolis, 1947); Irene D. Paden, *The Wake of the Prairie Schooner* (New York, 1945); Federal Writers' Project, W.P.A., *The Oregon Trail* (New York, 1939); Hiram D. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade* (New York, 1936), II, 459 ff.

South Pass. Missionaries and adventurers accompanied the traders westward during the 1830's. The Bidwell expedition of 1841 is generally considered to be the first bona fide emigrant train. In 1843 came the first great migration of about one thousand souls to Oregon. Successive waves of migrations to Oregon followed through the 1840's, while in 1847 came the Mormon pioneers headed by Brigham Young. The year 1849 witnessed the beginning of the fabulous California Gold Rush, which extended through much of the 1850's. It is estimated that two hundred and fifty thousand men, women, and children journeyed over this route by covered wagon.

In 1859 migration was diverted to the Colorado gold fields, but the Platte route remained the main line of communication with Utah, Oregon, and California. The Pony Express of 1860-61 was replaced by the Pacific Telegraph. The California stage line, so well described by Mark Twain, followed this route until 1863. Indian hostilities prevailed along the Platte during the period 1863-66, but the Army, with field headquarters at Fort Laramie, kept the route and telegraph lines open except for brief periods. From the time of the Utah War in 1858-59 until the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, the North Platte was primarily a military road and a supply route, alive with couriers, cavalry expeditions, and ox-drawn freighters.

The junction of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads in 1869 symbolized the end of the Platte-North Platte River route as the main transcontinental line. Through the Seventies the Platte route was used principally by the Fort Laramie troops and cattlemen who were opening up the range. In 1876 it was intersected at Fort Laramie and at Camp Clarke Bridge (near present Bridgeport) by routes to the new gold fields in the Black Hills. The first homesteaders filtered into the North Platte Valley in 1884.

The historic route up the North Platte had different names at different times, depending on destinations. Traditionally, it is best known as "the Oregon Trail."

Chimney Rock is certainly one of the famous landmarks of the Oregon Trail. Although fame is something difficult to measure quantitatively, either in men or in inanimate objects, there are nevertheless degrees of fame, and a fairly good case can be made for Chimney Rock being the most famous of all the great landmarks of westward migration.

III

There are literally hundreds of journals, diaries, and reminiscences, published and unpublished, of Oregon Trail experiences. Reference to Chimney Rock is almost invariably found in these documents. Most writers take time out to describe their impressions of it in detail, some of them taking pages in the process. Adjectives such as "famous," "celebrated," "notorious" are commonplace. Many use the phrase, "the most celebrated landmark," "the most remarkable object I ever saw," etc. Most writers express surprise and admiration, occasionally becoming ecstatic in their praise. A few are disdainful or disappointed, but it is significant that practically no traveler ever ignored Chimney Rock.

This is true regardless of which side of the river was traveled—the south or Chimney Rock side, used by those "jumping off" from St. Joseph, Independence, or Westport (the most heavily traveled, the true "Oregon Trail"), or the north side or "Mormon Trail," pioneered by the Mormons but used by all who "jumped off" from Council Bluffs and vicinity. Chimney Rock caught the eye and commanded attention for a stretch of over forty miles along the trail.

Robert Stuart and other Astorians in 1813 were probably the first white men to behold the Chimney, but they did not describe it.³ (After a winter of privation, they were in no mood to appreciate the scenery.) The first recorded use of the name occurred in Joshua Pilcher's report on his expedition of 1827, when he led forty-five trappers up the Platte Valley to the Salt Lake rendezvous of the fur trappers.⁴

Among noted travelers who have left vivid descriptions are Warren A. Ferris of the American Fur Company in 1830,⁵

³Philip Ashton Rollins, *The Discovery of the Oregon Trail: Robert Stuart's Narratives of His Overland Trip Eastward from Astoria in 1812-13* . . . (New York, 1935), p. 205.

⁴Grant Shumway, *History of Western Nebraska and Its People* (Lincoln, 1921), II, 3, 16, 54.

⁵Paul C. Phillips, ed., *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, by W. A. Ferris (Denver, 1940), pp. 29-30.

Captain Bonneville in 1832,⁶ Nathaniel Wyeth in 1832,⁷ William Anderson in 1834⁸ (who accompanied William Sublette, founder of Fort Laramie), the Rev. Samuel Parker in 1835,⁹ the artist Alfred J. Miller in 1837,¹⁰ Wislizenus in 1839,¹¹ Father De Smet in 1840 and 1841,¹² Rufus B. Sage¹³ and John Bidwell in 1841,¹⁴ Charles Preuss (of Fremont's expedition) in 1842,¹⁵ members of Kearny's Dragoons in 1845,¹⁶ Francis Parkman in 1846,¹⁷ many diarists of the Mormon pioneers in 1847,¹⁸ the explorer Howard Stansbury in 1849,¹⁹ many members of military and freighting expedi-

⁶Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (New York, n.d.), p. 60.

⁷Nathaniel J. Wyeth, "Journal of Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth's Expeditions to the Oregon Country," *Sources of the History of Oregon*, I, Parts 3-6 incl., 155-156.

⁸Albert J. Partoll, "Anderson's Narrative of a Ride to the Rocky Mountains in 1834," *Frontier and Midland* (Montana State University, Missoula), XIX (Autumn 1938).

⁹Rev. Samuel Parker, *Journal of an Exploring Tour Beyond the Rocky Mountains* (Boston, 1844).

¹⁰Marvin C. Ross, ed., *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller*, from the notes and water colors in the Walters Art Gallery (Norman, 1951), pp. 20, 54.

¹¹F. A. Wislizenus, *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839* (St. Louis, 1912).

¹²Hiram Martin Chittenden and Alfred Talbot Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet* . . . (New York, 1905), I, 209; II, 685; IV, 1349.

¹³Rufus B. Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life; or Startling Scenes and Perilous Adventures in the Far West* (Boston, 1857), pp. 90-91.

¹⁴John Bidwell, *A Journey to California, with Observations about the Country, Climate and the Route to this Country*, with an introduction by Herbert Ingram Priestley (San Francisco, 1937), p. 7.

¹⁵Brevet Captain J. C. Fremont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842* . . . (Washington, 1845), p. 38.

¹⁶Phillip St. George Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures in the Army, or Romance of Military Life* (Philadelphia, 1859), pp. 318-321; also, J. Henry Carleton, *The Prairie Logbooks. Dragoon Campaign to the Pawnee Villages in 1844, and to the Rocky Mountains in 1845*, edited by Louis Pelzer (Chicago, 1943), pp. 232-236.

¹⁷Mason Wade, ed., *The Journals of Francis Parkman* (New York, 1947), II, 437, 623.

¹⁸William Clayton, *The Latter-Day Saints Emigrants Guide* (St. Louis, 1848), pp. 184-187.

¹⁹Howard Stansbury, *Exploration and Survey of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake of Utah, including a Reconnaissance of a New Route through the Rocky Mountains* (Washington, 1853), pp. 48-52.

tions of the 1850's and 1860's,²⁰ the English traveler Richard F. Burton in 1860,²¹ and William H. Jackson in 1866.²²

At least twenty-one early sketches of Chimney Rock appear in the records of Oregon Trail travelers: A. J. Miller in 1837;²³ Father Nicholas Point in 1841;²⁴ Charles Preuss in 1842;²⁵ J. Quinn Thornton in 1846;²⁶ William E. Egan in 1847;²⁷ J. G. Bruff²⁸ and A. J. Lindsay [?] in 1849; Franklin Street in 1850;²⁹ W. Wadsworth in 1852;³⁰ George H. Baker³¹ and Frederick Piercy³² in 1853; William A. Maxwell,³³ Cornelius Conway,³⁴ and Jesse A. Gove³⁵ in 1857;

²⁰T. S. Kenderdine, *A California Tramp and Later Footprints* (Newton, Pa., 1888), pp. 64-65; also, Eugene F. Ware, *Indian War of 1864* (Topeka, 1911).

²¹Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints, and Across the Rocky Mountains to California* (London, 1861), pp. 92-93.

²²William H. Jackson, "From the W. H. Jackson Diary 1866," *Nebraska History Magazine*, XIII, No. 3, 157.

²³Bernard De Voto, *Across the Wide Missouri* (Cambridge, 1947) pp. 36, 190, 223, 330, 413, 417, 437.

²⁴John Francis McDermott, "De Smet's Illustrator: Father Nicholas Point," *Nebraska History*, XXXIII (March 1952), opp. p. 36.

²⁵Fremont, *op. cit.*

²⁶J. Quinn Thornton, *Oregon and California in 1848* (New York, 1849), I, 101.

²⁷William E. Egan, ed., *Pioneering the West, 1846-1878. Major Howard Egan's Diary . . .* (Richmond, Utah, 1917), p. 143.

²⁸Georgia Willis Read and Ruth Gaines, *Gold Rush. The Journals, Drawings and other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff, Captain, Washington City and California Mining Association . . .* (New York, 1944), pp. 28-31.

²⁹Franklin Street, *California in 1850, Compared with What It Was in 1849, with a Glimpse of Its Future Destiny. Also, a Concise Description of the Overland Route . . .* (Cincinnati: R. E. Edwards & Co., 1851), frontispiece.

³⁰W. Wadsworth, *The National Wagon Road, from St. Joseph and Council Bluffs on the Missouri River, via South Pass of the Rocky Mountains, to California . . .* (San Francisco, 1858), pp. 43-46.

³¹J. M. Hutchings, *Hutchings' Panoramic Scenes. Views drawn from Nature in 1853 by George H. Baker.*

³²James Linforth, *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley*, illustrated by Frederick Piercy (Liverpool, 1855), p. 91.

³³William A. Maxwell, *Crossing the Plains Days of '57*, (privately printed, 1915), p. 22.

³⁴Cornelius Conway, *The Utah Expedition* (Cincinnati, 1858), pp. 7-8.

³⁵Otis G. Hammond, *The Utah Expedition, 1857-1858, Letters of Capt. Jesse A. Gove, 10th Inf., U. S. A. . . .* (Concord, 1928), pp. 47-48.

T. S. Kenderdine in 1858;³⁶ Captain Marcy in 1895;³⁷ Richard F. Burton in 1860;³⁸ Captain Ware in 1864;³⁹ Col. Henry B. Carrington,⁴⁰ and William H. Jackson in 1866;⁴¹ and Alfred Lambourne in 1874.⁴² Only two of these have failed to find publication. It is uncertain whether the Gove sketch is still in existence; it is not in the Gove collection, held by the New Hampshire Historical Society. Lt. Andrew Jackson Lindsay of the Mountain Riflemen has been suggested as the artist of a sketch in the Wisconsin Historical Society.⁴³

Chimney Rock was almost invariably referred to as just that—Chimney Rock. However, alternate names were given in a few early instances. Ferris referred to "Nose Mountain."⁴⁴ Alfred Miller quotes one trapper as reporting "b'ar and beaver sign as plain as Chimley Rock on the Platte."⁴⁵

For what it is worth, there is a legend that Indians called this rock "The Tepee"⁴⁶ or "The Wigwam."⁴⁷ After all, the wild Indians never saw a real chimney.

The majority of diarists agreed that Chimney Rock was indeed well named, discerning the likeness of a factory chimney, the chimney ruins of a burned house, etc. Others saw instead an inverted funnel, a lighthouse, the trunk of

³⁶Kenderdine, *op. cit.*

³⁷Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveller, a Handbook for Overland Expeditions* . . . (New York, 1859).

³⁸Burton, *op. cit.*

³⁹Ware, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰Henry B. Carrington, *The Great American Desert* (Hyde Park, Mass.: Hyde Park Historical Society).

⁴¹Howard R. Driggs, *Westward America*, with reproductions of forty water color paintings by William H. Jackson (Philadelphia, 1942).

⁴²Alfred Lambourne, *The Pioneer Trail* (Salt Lake City, 1913), p. 38. Lambourne's published sketch is quite blurred. The same sketch, in color and much sharper in detail, hangs on exhibit in The Union Pacific Railroad Museum in Omaha. Although a superimposed caption on this exhibit describes the scene as 1847, the artist's faint signature bears the date 1874. It is possible that the picture was painted from memory after a lapse of 27 years.

⁴³Joseph Schafer, "Trailing a Trail Artist in 1849," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XII (September 1928), 97-108.

⁴⁴Phillips, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵Ross, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶Federal Writers' Project, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷Elizabeth Hughes Thies, "Historic Chimney Rock," *Omaha World-Herald Magazine*, February 4, 1951.

a gigantic tree, a shot-tower, etc. Some with poetic fancy thought they recognized the Bunker Hill Monument,⁴⁸ "the contemplated Washington Monument," an Egyptian obelisk, the spire of a cathedral,⁴⁹ the "pharos of a prairie sea," etc. Those less poetic spoke disparaging of "a potato hole"⁵⁰ or "a haystack with a pole through its top."⁵¹

One curious aspect of Chimney Rock is commented on by a large number of emigrants. That is the "mirage" or deceptive distance of Chimney Rock from the beholder, variously attributed to extreme clarity of the atmosphere in those parts and unfamiliarity of the emigrants with distances on the High Plains. Also, it was difficult to gauge the height of Chimney Rock for lack of any handy comparison. (Estimates varied from fifty feet to seven hundred feet!) The Rock was actually about two miles south of the main trail, but it was in view of the westbound emigrant for thirty or forty miles from the east, or two full days' travel, exciting his curiosity. It was almost a standard experience to make a side trip ahead of the train to Chimney Rock; what seemed to be only a mile or so would turn out to be five or ten miles. No other landmark on the trail seemed quite so invested with strangeness and wonder.

So intrigued were the emigrants that thousands of them clambered up the sides of the cone to inscribe their names. Many swam across the river from the north side just to climb up "this great natural curiosity." There is ample testimony that thousands of names once adorned the Rock, although no inscriptions are known to survive today in the soft Brule clay.

One other curious aspect of Chimney Rock should be noted, and that is the historic notion, still prevalent, that Chimney Rock is extremely fragile, ready to split asunder

⁴⁸E. S. Ingalls, *Journal of a Trip to California by the Overland Route Across the Plains in 1850-51* (Waukegan, 1852), p. 22; Lell Hawley Wooley, *California, 1849-1913* (Oakland, 1913), p. 5.

⁴⁹Joseph Schafer, ed., "Diary of Thomas Woodward While Crossing the Plains of California in 1850," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XVII (March 1934), pp. 355-356.

⁵⁰Leander V. Loomis, *A Journal of the Birmingham Emigrating Company . . .*, ed. by Edgar M. Ledyard (Salt Lake City, 1928), p. 27.

⁵¹David Morris Potter, ed., *Trail to California: The Overland Journal of Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly* (New Haven, 1945), p. 103; John Steele, *The Traveler's Companion* (Galena, 1854), p. 17.

or melt down or collapse at any moment; further, that within the memory of man the Rock was much higher, but is now much diminished. Obviously weathering has created this rock and additional weathering will eventually reduce it entirely, but just how rapidly this is occurring is problematical. Comparison of the Miller sketch of 1837 and the Lambourne sketch of 1874 with its appearance today does suggest that the Rock has diminished in height within the last one hundred years, but there is no way of knowing whether it has worn down gradually or broken off in big cataclysmic chunks. Another measurement by the Geological Survey would be needed to determine if it has been substantially reduced from the elevation of 4,242 feet given by surveyors in 1895.

Early accounts mention a split in the Chimney (still in evidence) and dire predictions are made. Most observers, past and present, overlook the fact that the Chimney is still quite massive and solidly based. It will not last forever, but on the basis of past performance it seems safe to predict that it will preserve its unique contours for a good many centuries.

In the immediate vicinity of Chimney Rock there was an excellent spring which made it a favorite camp site. In the 1860's there was a Chimney Rock Pony Express station which became later a telegraph and stage station.⁵² Also, in the immediate vicinity were—and may still be—at least a dozen graves, identified by Bruff and others; for the Asiatic cholera of 1849 and the early 1850's reached its climax among emigrant trains along the North Platte.⁵³ However, all of these things—springs, camp sites, stations, graves, inscriptions—were to be found the whole length of the Oregon Trail. The distinctive feature of Chimney Rock was its quality as a unique and memorable landmark.

The lasting impression which this curiosity made on fur traders, missionaries, gold-seekers, soldiers, and adventurers of the nineteenth century can best be conveyed by direct quotations from representative journals and guidebooks.

⁵²Merrill J. Mattes, "Fort Mitchell, Scotts Bluff, Nebraska Territory," *Nebraska History*, XXXIII (March 1952), pp. 4-5.

⁵³Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*

IV

1830 Warren A. Ferris

We reached on the following day the "Nose Mountain," or as it is more commonly called, the "Chimney," a singular mound, which has the form of an inverted funnel, is half a mile in circumference at the base, and rises to the height of three hundred feet. It is situated on the southern margin of the North Fork of the Platte, in the vicinity of several high bluffs, to which it was evidently once attached; is on all sides inaccessible, and appears at the distance of fifty miles shooting up from the prairie in solitary grandeur, like the limbless trunk of a gigantic tree. It is five hundred miles west from the Council Bluffs.⁵⁴

1832 Nathaniel J. Wyeth

June 9th . . . arrived at the Chimney or Elk Brick the Indian name this singular object looks like a monument about 200 feet high and is composed of layers of sand and lime stone in layers the sand blowing out lets the lime rock fall down and this action has in time reduced what was once a hill to a spire of nearly the same dimensions at top and bottom it looks like a work of art.⁵⁵

1832 Captain Bonneville

Opposite to the camp at this place was a singular phenomenon, which is among the curiosities of the country. It is called the Chimney. The lower part is a conical mound, rising out of the naked plain; from the summit shoots up a shaft or column, about one hundred and twenty feet in height, from which it derives its name. The height of the whole, according to Captain Bonneville, is a hundred and seventy-five yards. It is composed of indurated clay, with alternate layers of red and white sandstone, and may be seen at the distance of upwards of thirty miles.⁵⁶

1840 Father De Smet

On the 31st of May we camped two miles and a half from one of the most remarkable curiosities of this savage region. It is a cone-shaped eminence of not far from a league in circumference, gashed by many ravines and standing upon a smooth plain. From the summit of this hill rises a square shaft, thirty to forty feet through by 150 in height; the form of this column has given it the name of the Chimney; it is 175 yards above the plain, and may be perceived from thirty miles away . . . a few years more and this great natural curiosity will crumble away and make only a little heap on the plain; for when it is examined near at hand, an enormous crack appears in its top.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Phillips, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵Wyeth, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶Irving, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷Chittenden and Richardson, *op. cit.*

1841 Father De Smet

I shall add a few remarks about the buttes that are seen in the vicinity of the Platte River. The most remarkable of all, at least that which is best known to the generality of travelers, is the one to which they have given the name of "Chimney." It is called so on account of its extraordinary form; but instead of applying to it an appellation which is rather unworthy this wonder of nature, just because it bears some resemblance to the object after which it is named, it would have been more proper to call it "the inverted funnel," as there is no object which it resembles more.⁵⁸

1841 John Bidwell

F. 18th. About 12 o'clock today we passed another object, still more singular and interesting—it is called by the Mountaineers, the Chimney, from its resemblance to that object; and is composed of clay and sand so completely compact, as to possess the hardness of a rock. It . . . is seen towering like a huge column at the distance of 30 miles. The column is 150 feet above the top of the cone and the whole, 250 feet above the level of the plain.⁵⁹

1841 Rufus B. Sage

Oct. 26. Raising camp at daylight we resumed our way, and soon afterwards arrived opposite the "Chimney," an extraordinary natural curiosity that had continued in view and excited our admiration for some four days past.

This singular formation surmounts a conical eminence which rises, isolated and lonely, in the open prairie, reaching a height of three hundred feet. It is composed of terrene limestone and marl, quadrangularly shaped, like the spire of some church, six feet by ten at its base, with an altitude of more than two hundred feet,—making, together with the mound, an elevation of five hundred feet.* A grand and imposing spectacle, truly;—a wonderful display of the eccentricity of Nature!

* Formerly the "Chimney" was much higher than at present, and could be distinctly seen in a clear day as far as Ash Creek. The wind and the rain are continually reducing it; and it is said to be full fifty feet less than it was nine years ago. Calculating from this datum, what must have been its altitude no longer remote than a couple of centuries.⁶⁰

1842 Charles Preuss

July 9 . . . toward noon came in sight of the celebrated Chimney Rock. It looks, at this distance of about thirty miles, like what it is called—the long chimney of a steam-factory establishment, or a shot-tower in Baltimore. . . .

July 10 . . . In the course of the day we met some whites,

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹Bidwell, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰Sage, *op. cit.*

who were following along in the train of Mr. Bridger; and, after a day's journey of twenty-four miles, encamped about sunset at the Chimney rock, of which the annexed drawing will render any description unnecessary. It consists of marl and earthy limestone, and the weather is rapidly diminishing its height, which is now not more than two hundred feet above the river. Travellers who visited it some years since, place its height at upwards of five hundred feet.⁶¹

1842 Elijah White

... The chimney, which they distinguished at nearly two days' travel from the spot, was strikingly like the contemplated Washington Monument; a column running up to the height of, perhaps, two hundred feet from the centre of which shoots up a tall spire, very much the shape of a chimney.⁶²

1845 J. Henry Carleton

June 10 ... At ten o'clock we came in sight of the celebrated "Chimney Rock." It was upwards of thirty miles when we first saw it, and yet the mirage brought it so completely above the horizon, that its general outline and comparative height could be very well determined. ...

June 11 ... At the termination of one of these points, and at a distance of, say four miles from the river, stands the "Chimney Rock," one of the greatest curiosities—perhaps the greatest—in the whole valley of the Mississippi. It is a much more beautiful structure, and of far greater magnitude, than one would imagine it to be from Mr. Preuss' drawing of it, published in Capt. Fremont's first journal. ... As the materials of which it is formed are decomposing very fast, in a few years it will have worn entirely away. The shaft is already rent from top to bottom, and one would suppose that the first high wind would topple it down.⁶³

1845 Phillip St. George Cooke

June 10 ... We came in sight today, also, of the Chimney Rock, at a distance of thirty miles; it had the appearance of a tall post seen a mile off. ...

June 11 ... On the left, the square bluffs were like the Hudson Palisades, with here and there a pilaster of silvery white; right in front, stood the lofty white Chimney Rock, like the pharos of a prairie sea. ...⁶⁴

1846 Virgil K. Pringle

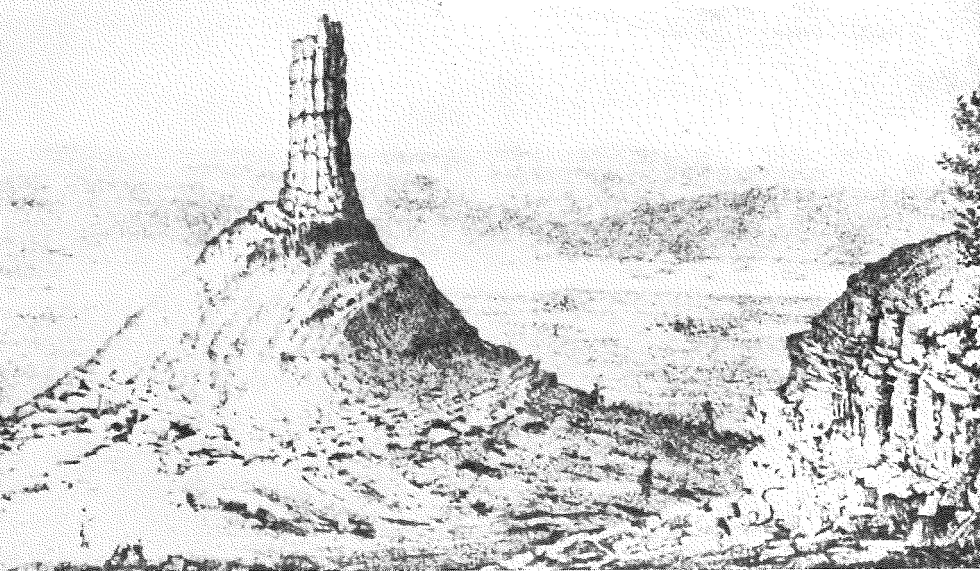
June 19—Passed the chimney in the fore part of the day and the formation of the bluffs have a tendency to fill the mind with awe and grandeur. The chimney might pass for

⁶¹Fremont, *op. cit.*

⁶²A. J. Allen, *Thrilling Adventures, Travels and Explorations of Doctor Elijah White* ... (New York, 1859), pp. 152-153.

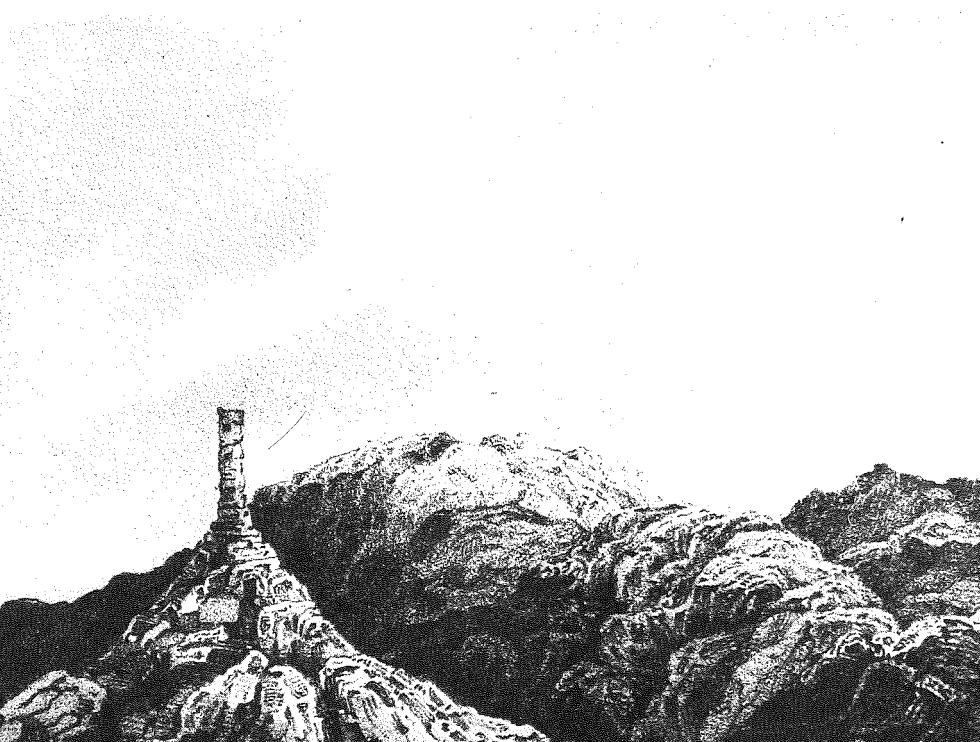
⁶³Carleton, *op. cit.*

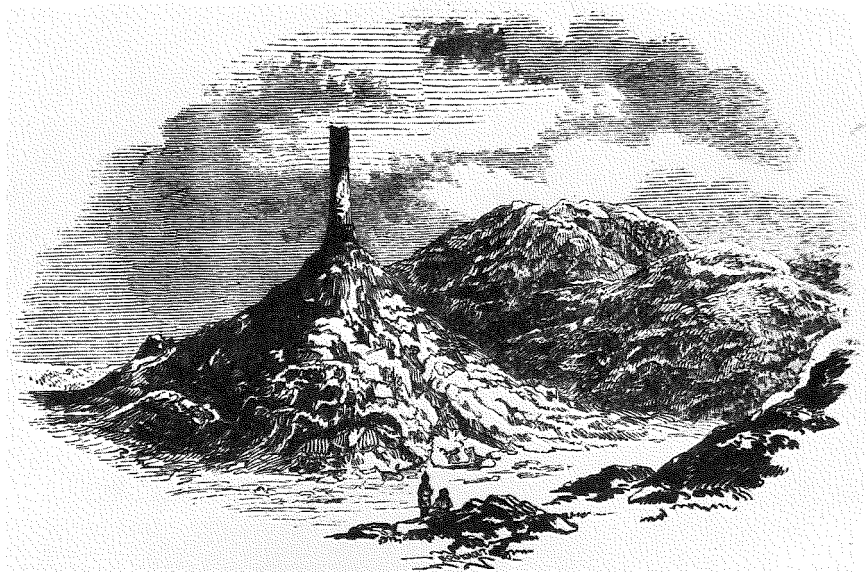
⁶⁴Cooke, *op. cit.*



Father Nicholas Point, 1841

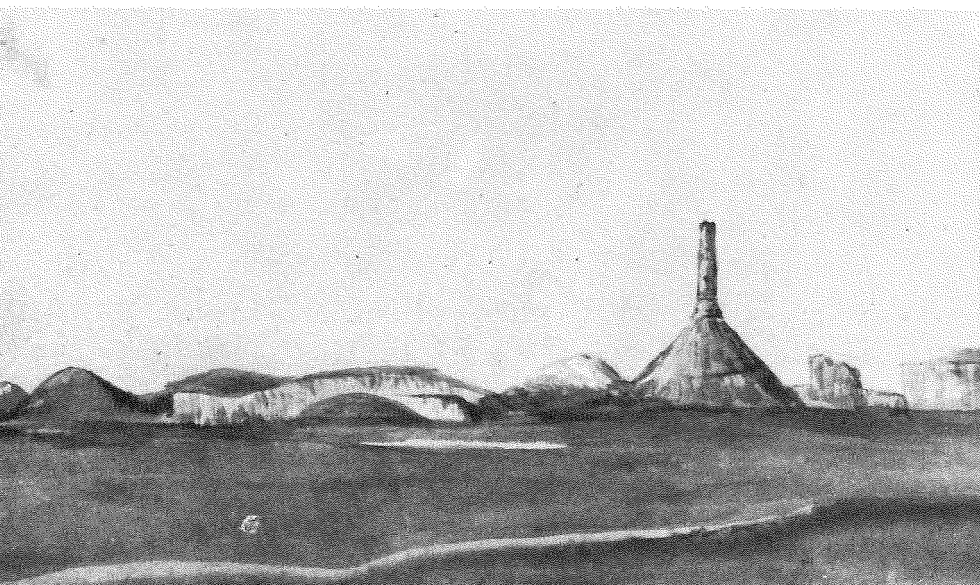
Charles Preuss, 1842





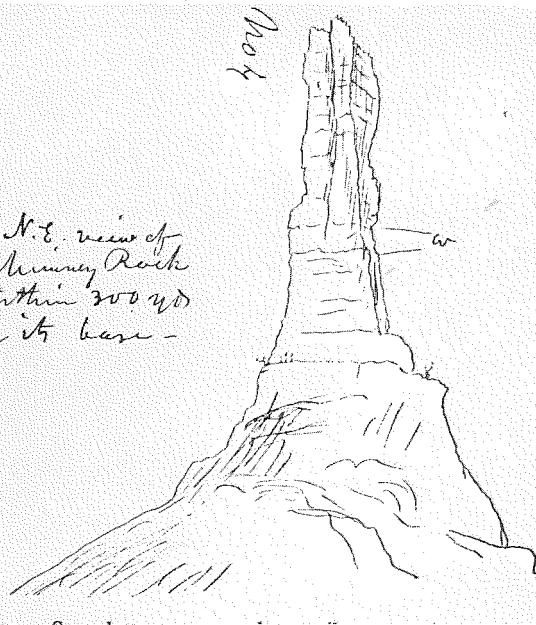
J. Quinn Thornton, 1846

A. J. Lindsay, 1849



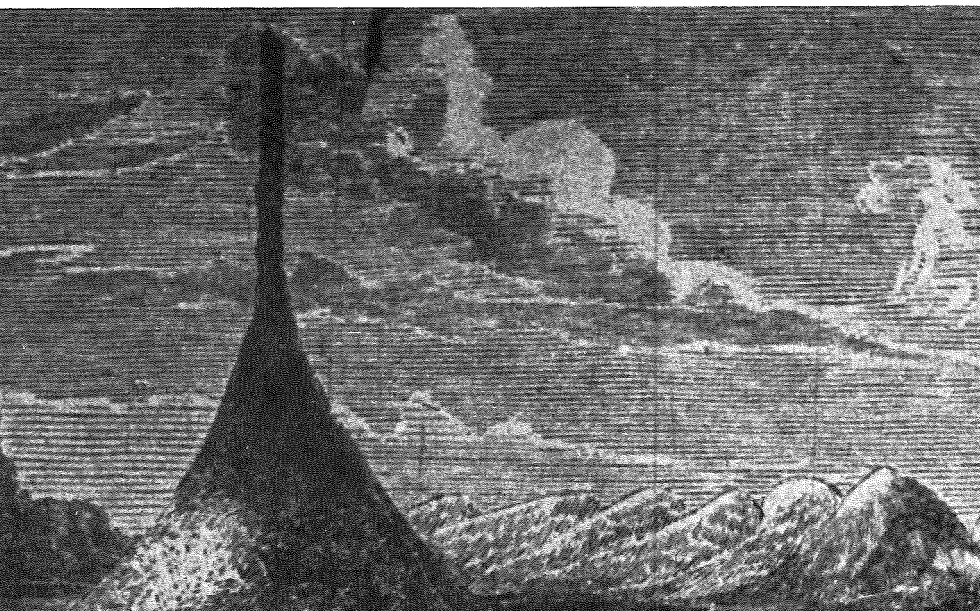


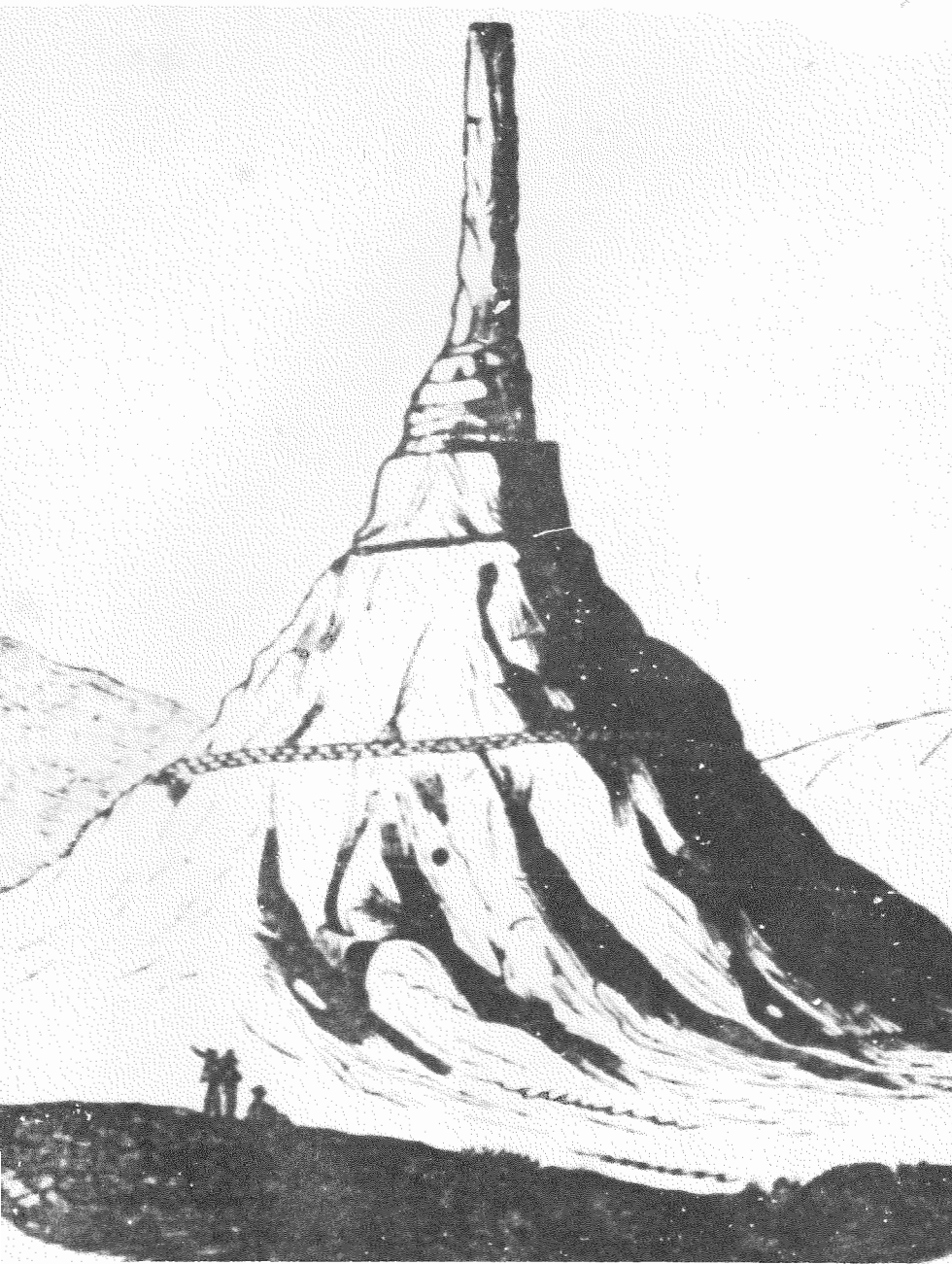
to N.E. view of
Chimney Rock
within 300 yds
of its base -



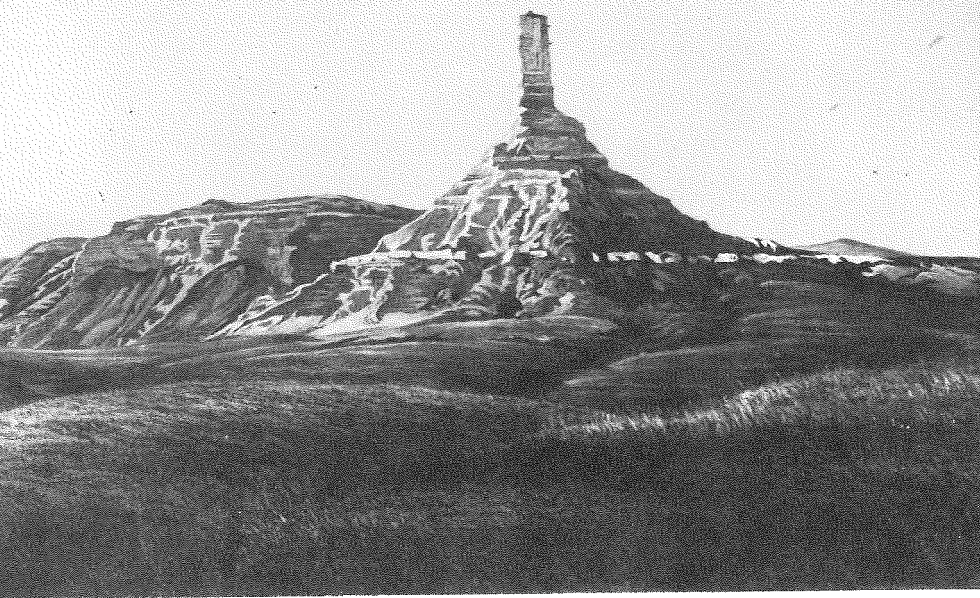
J. Goldsborough Bruff, 1849

Franklin Street, 1850





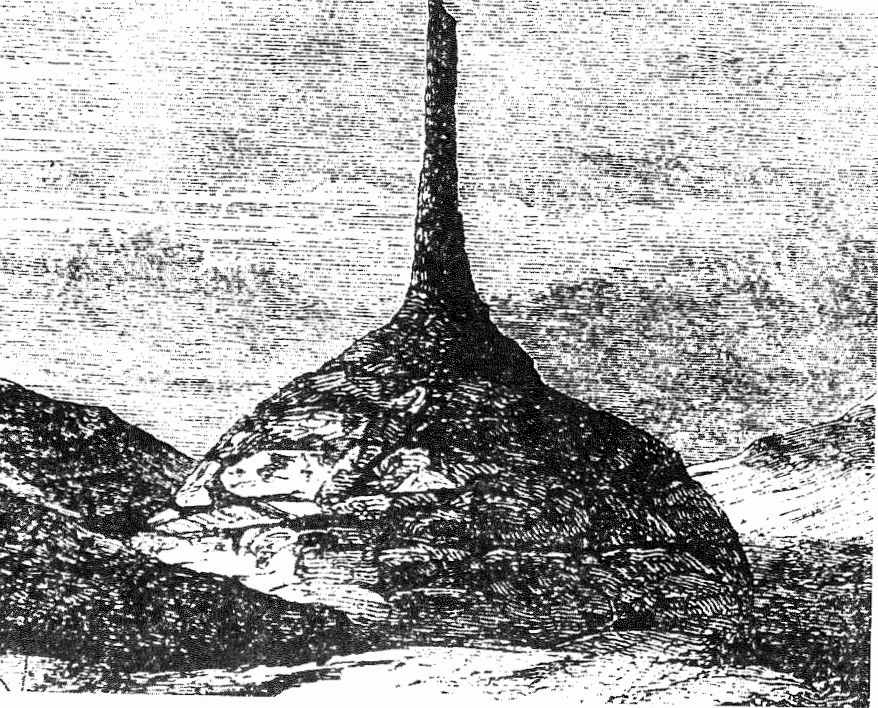
W. Wadsworth, 1852



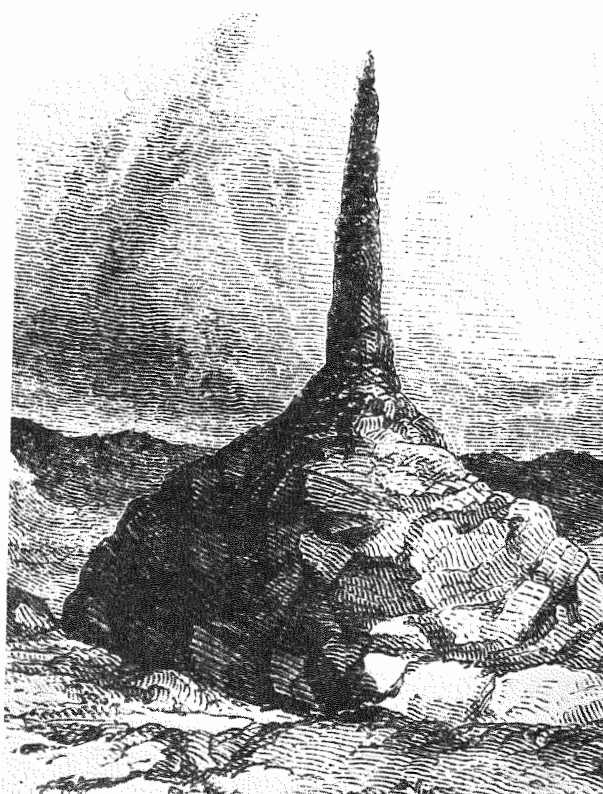
Frederick Piercy, 1853



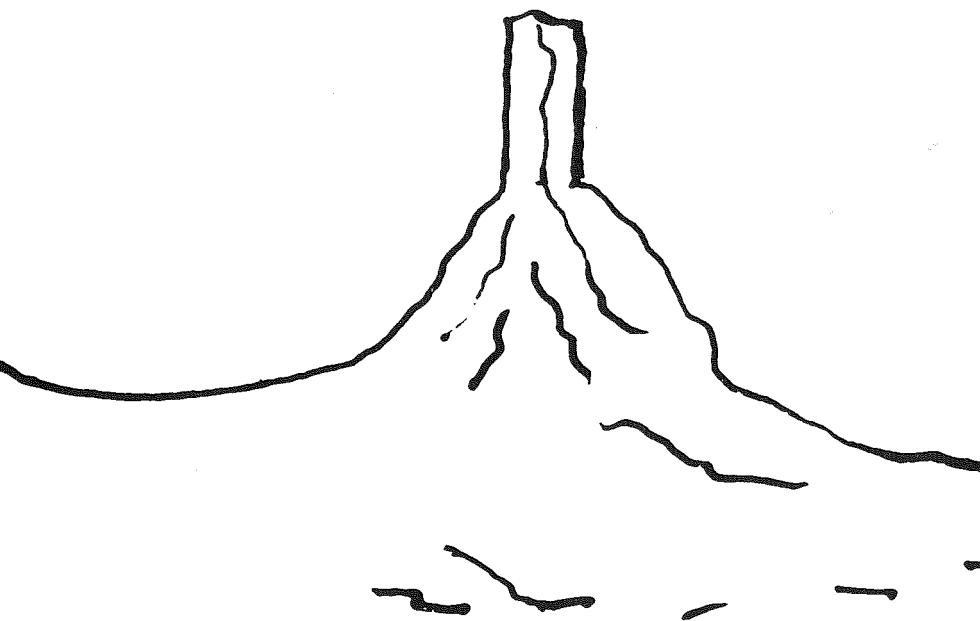
Wm. Audley Maxwell, 1857



T. S. Kenderdine, 1858

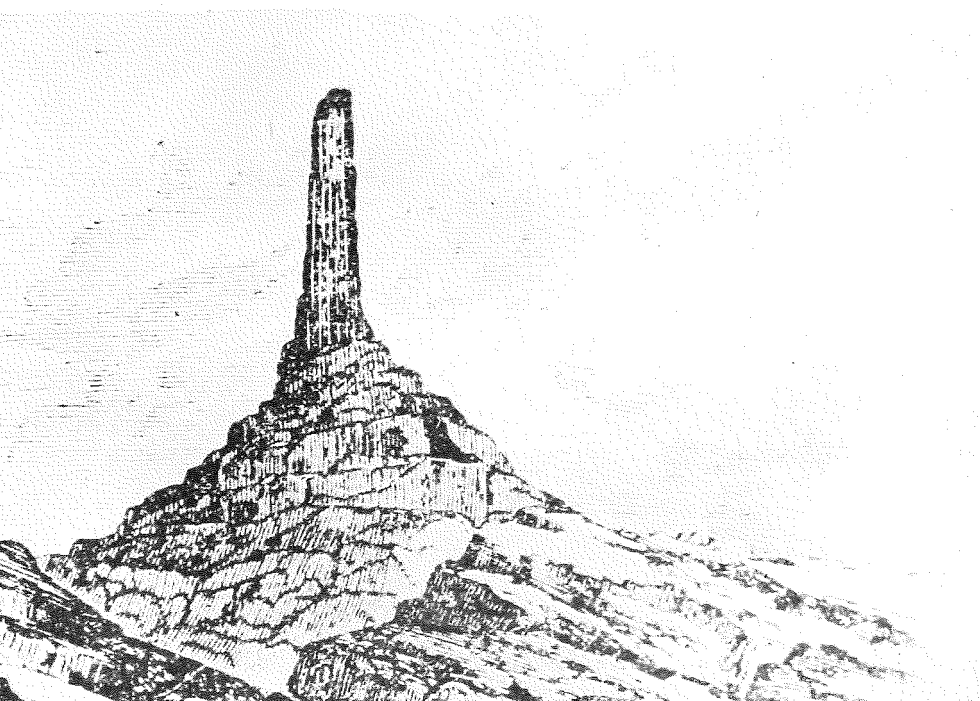


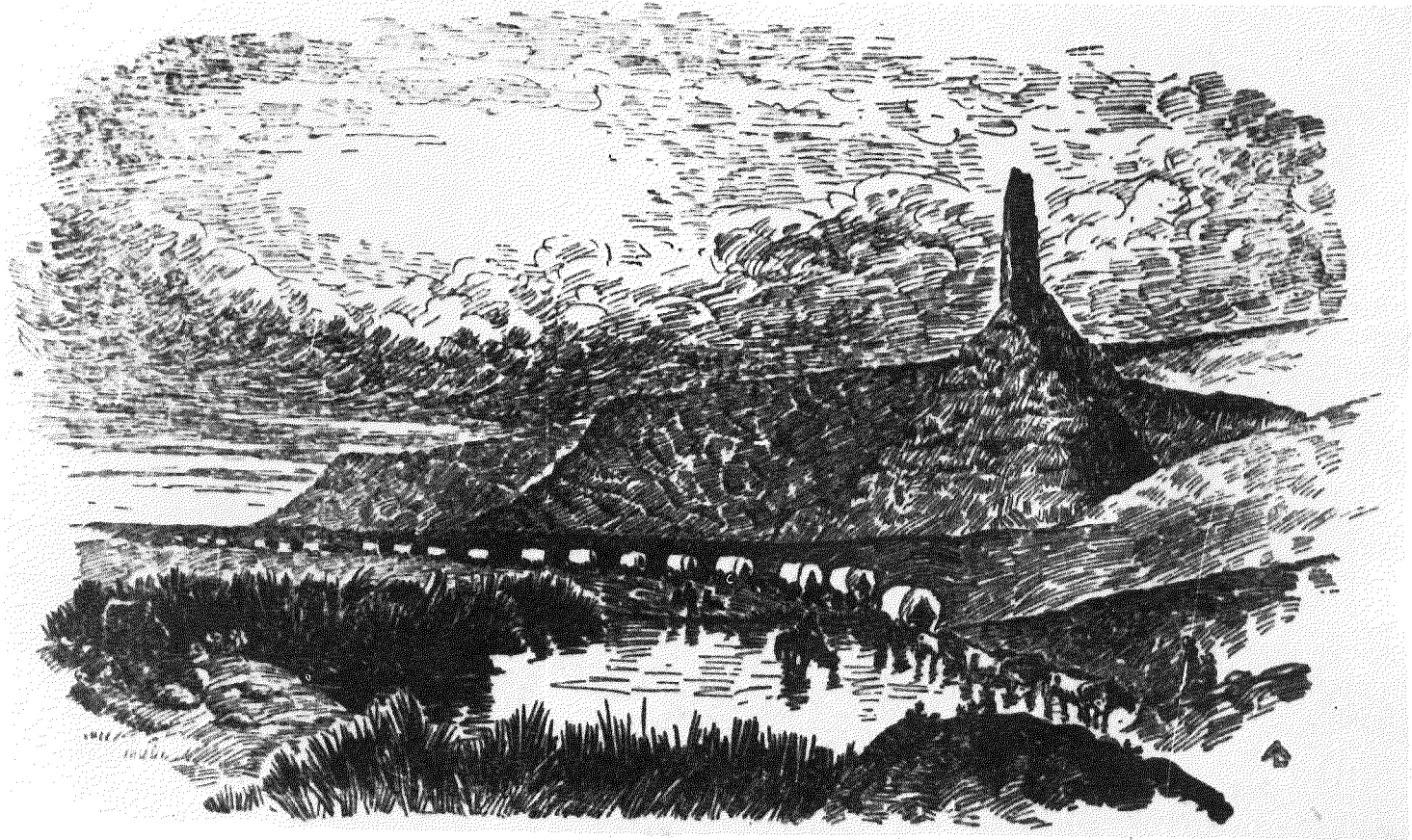
Randolph B.
Marcy,
1859



Eugene F. Ware, 1864

Col. H. B. Carrington, 1866





Alfred Lambourne, 1874

one of the foundries in St. Louis, were it blackened by burning stone coal. . . .⁶⁵

1846 J. Quinn Thornton

[June 23] We proceeded until half an hour before sunset, when we encamped for the night in an open grassy plain, on the right of the road, and in sight of the celebrated Chimney Rock, which had been in view since the afternoon of the 22nd [June]⁶⁶

1847 William Clayton

Saturday 22nd [May] . . . At the distance I should judge of about twenty miles, I could see Chimney Rock very plainly with the naked eye, which from here very much resembles the large factory chimneys in England.

. . . Chimney Rock shows very plain and appears not more than two miles distance but is no doubt five miles distance or over. . . . Elder Orson Pratt is taking an observation to ascertain the height of Chimney Rock. . . .

Wednesday 26th . . . we arrived at a point directly north of Chimney Rock which we ascertained by the compass, having traveled since it was first discovered 41½ miles. . . . Elder Pratt found that Chimney Rock is 260 feet high from its base to its summit and the distance from our road at the nearest point three miles.⁶⁷

1849 Lucius Fairchild

. . . Passed the famous Chimney Rock on the 18th [June]. We could see it nearly fifty miles distance. I climbed up as far as anybody ever did and took a view of the country which was simply splendid all around the bottom was covered with camps among which was Uncle Sam's trains. . . .⁶⁸

1849 Isaac Foster

June 12. . . . Rainy; passed on opposite the Chimney Rock on south side of the river; one of the greatest natural curiosities I have yet seen, it resembles a large pyramid or castle with a dome in the middle.

It looks like a large building with a tall chimney at the distance of 44 miles; . . .⁶⁹

1849 Joseph Hackney

[June] 9 Started early this morning and went 18 miles we passed chimney rock at ten o'clock this is the most remarkable object that i ever saw and if situated in the

⁶⁵Virgil K. Pringle, "Diary," *Transactions of the Forty-Eighth Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association*, 1920, p. 288.

⁶⁶Thornton, *op. cit.*

⁶⁷Clayton, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸Joseph Schafer, ed., *California Letters of Lucius Fairchild* (Madison, 1931), pp. 30-31.

⁶⁹Lucy Foster Sexton, ed., *The Foster Family, California Pioneers* (Santa Barbara, 1925), pp. 30-31.

states would be visited by pearsons from all parts of the world⁷⁰

1849 Wm. G. Johnston

Saturday, May 26. . . . Chimney Rock, since we first saw it, has loomed up steadily, reminding us of pictures often seen of the great Egyptian obelisks, towering high above the vast deserts which surround them. A number of us, riding in advance of the train, sought to get a near view of it; but as all prominent objects on the plains are vastly more distant than they at first seem, we were longer reaching it than we had expected to be. . . .

The winds and rains of centuries are the sculptors which have hewn this great column; and Titans of nature though they be, in the selection of a material for showing their skill in art, they have been immeasurably behind Tothmes or Rameses, whose blocks of granite well nigh mark the beginnings of time, and may yet endure through ages to come, when amid the shifting sands of the Platte nothing shall remain to mark the site of Chimney Rock.⁷¹

1849 William Kelly

There was now observable through the mist high up in the clouds a pointed object, that looked like the top of some monumental erection, becoming more and more distinctly defined as we proceeded. With its base still enveloped in fog, we camped parallel with it We headed toward this tapering rock, called by roamers of the prairie "Chimney Rock," though, to my eye, there is not a single lineament in its outline to warrant the christening. The Wellington Testimonial, in the Phoenix Park, elevated on a Danish Fort, would give a much more correct idea of its configuration, though not of its proportions. It is, I should say, five hundred feet high. . . . It appears to be fast chipping and crumbling away, and I have no doubt that, ere half a century elapses, "Troja fuit" will apply to the Chimney Rock. After surveying it on every side, and adorning its base with some hieroglyphics, we went about gathering our firewood; and while ransacking the ravines I was quite astonished to find considerable deposits of that fine black sand which most generally indicates the presence of gold. . . .⁷²

1849 Howard Stansbury

July 7 . . . This morning we caught a view of the celebrated "Chimney Rock,"

After a warm drive of twenty-five miles, we encamped

⁷⁰Elizabeth Page, *Wagons West. A Story of the Oregon Trail* (New York, 1930), p. 142.

⁷¹Wm. G. Johnston, *Experiences of a Forty-Niner* (Pittsburgh, 1892), pp. 114-115.

⁷²William Kelly, *An Excursion to California* (London, 1851), pp. 146-150.

within five miles of the Chimney Rock. . . . Here we spent the following day, which was the Sabbath. . . .

July 9 . . . Before us was the Chimney Rock, a point on this route so well known and so often described. . . . That the shaft has been very much higher than at present, is evident from the corresponding formation of the bluffs, as well as from the testimony of all the voyageurs with whom it was for years a landmark or beacon visible for forty or fifty miles, both up and down the river. It is the opinion of Mr. Bridger that it was reduced to its present height by lightning, or some other sudden catastrophe, as he found it broken on his return from one of his trips to St. Louis, though he had passed it uninjured on his way down. Its vicinity has long been a favorite camping ground for the emigrants, as there are springs of water near and the grass is tolerably good. . . .⁷³

1850 James Abbey

May 28 . . . At 4 O'clock camped for the night on the banks of the Platte, about two miles from Chimney Rock. This remarkable curiosity has been in sight of us ever since yesterday at 12 o'clock. It derives its name from the resemblance it bears to a chimney. It is seven hundred feet in height, and in a clear day can be seen at a distance of forty miles. . . . It is composed of soft white sand stone. The violent storms that have raged in this region, have worn it into this shape. The column that represents the chimney is crumbling away and fast disappearing. Thousands of persons who have passed here during the last year have engraved their names upon it. . . .⁷⁴

1850 Henry J. Coke

July 13 . . . Passed some sandy hills and saw the Chimney Rock. The sight of this very curious eminence was cheering to all the party. . . .⁷⁵

1852 W. Wadsworth

Chimney Rock. Here is another of those remarkable natural formations that give to this country a strange and peculiar interest. . . .

We have now reached the foot of the shaft or column, and this is as high as any man ever trod with safety. A few dary and foolhardy adventurers however, have, by cutting foot and hand-holds in the soft rock, raised themselves a few feet, in order to inscribe their names the highest.

From this point, a perpendicular, rough shaft or column, nearly thirty feet square, rises upward over one hundred feet, and holds its full size to the very top, which appears

⁷³Stansbury, *op. cit.*

⁷⁴James Abbey, *California. A Trip Across the Plains in the Spring of 1850* . . . (New Albany, Indiana, 1850), p. 23.

⁷⁵Henry J. Coke, *A Ride Over the Rocky Mountains to Oregon and California* . . . (London, 1852), pp. 142-143.

nearly level, except that from the top downward, there is a fissure or crack, reaching nearly one-third of its length.

It resembles at a distance, a shot-tower, or one of those immense chimneys sometimes reared about factories, and can be seen a distance of fifty miles along the river.⁷⁶

1853 David Dinwiddie

June 7 . . . camped nearly opposite to chimney rock, it is a singular looking structure, we passed by being some six or seven miles from it, it being on the south side of the river but by looking through a telescope it could be seen very distinctly . . . the chimney runs up from the centre like a light house in form to a considerable height which makes it look splendid, it appears to be decaying very fast as it is falling off in great scales. Ere long the great conical shaft will disappear from the gaze of man. . . .⁷⁷

1853 Thomas Flint

Started early to get to water for breakfast which we got nearly north of Chimney Rock south side of the river. It is a sandstone shaft, say 50 feet high standing on a conical shaped mound about twice as high. Perhaps it is a hard core left from which the softer rock has been worn away by wind, water and other eroding actions of nature. It is truly named for it stands looking like the smoke stack of a furnace. . . . A pack of wolves hanging around.⁷⁸

1857 Cornelius Conway

. . . some miles beyond in the distance is seen the lofty pile called Chimney Rock, alone in its grandeur, towering towards the heavens. Some years ago lightning is supposed to have struck this hill, whereby about one-half of it was dissevered. The Indians and mountaineers who beheld this catastrophe aver that masses of rock and earth were hurled to the distance of two or three miles. . . .⁷⁹

1857 Jesse A. Gove

August 27. . . a spire of rock running up precisely like a chimney, and I cannot give you a better idea of it than to say that it has the appearance of a chimney standing after the house has burned down. . . .

August 28. . . . We at last got to the base of this curious freak of nature. I send you herewith my sketch dressed up a

⁷⁶W. Wadsworth, *The National Wagon Road, from St. Joseph and Council Bluffs on the Missouri River, via South Pass of the Rocky Mountains, to California* . . . (San Francisco, 1858), pp. 43-46.

⁷⁷Margaret Booth, "Overland from Indiana to Oregon. The Dinwiddie Journal," *Sources of Northwest History* No. 2 (Missoula, 1928).

⁷⁸Thomas Flint, *Diary of Thomas Flint. California to Maine and Return, 1851-1855* (Los Angeles, 1923), p. 32.

⁷⁹Cornelius Conway, *The Utah Expedition* (Cincinnati, 1858), pp. 7-8.

little. . . . After visiting this old land-mark and inscribing our names high up on the sandstone, we came down the perilous descent and took to the bluffs back of it for a hunt. . . .⁸⁰

1858 T. S. Kenderdine

. . . We came in sight of the celebrated Chimney Rock in the afternoon. This famous landmark, although some thirty miles distant, was plainly visible, owing to the extreme purity of the atmosphere.

We nooned on the 23d [August] by Chimney Rock. . . . Its summit is about one hundred and fifty feet above the plain, but it was at one time much higher, early travelers say five hundred feet. . . .⁸¹

1859 Charles M. Tuttle

June 23. Starting early this morning we came some 15 miles and encamped for noon opposite Chimney Rock on the south side of Platte River. . . . I had but little difficulty in crossing the river though the current is very swift and I had to swim a considerable of the way. . . . I saw hundreds of names out in the rock some at a dizzy height while others less ambitious had been content to subscribe their names lower down. I wrote mine above all except two and theirs were about 8 feet higher than mine but I should have written mine as high if not higher than theirs if I had not left my knife back on an island in the river . . .⁸²

1860 Richard F. Burton

. . . At 12 30 PM we nooned for an hour at a little hovel called a ranch, with the normal corral; and I took occasion to sketch the far-famed Chimney Rock. The name is not, as is that of the Court-house, a misnomer; one might almost expect to see smoke or steam jetting from the summit. . . . The old sketches of this curious needle now necessarily appear exaggerated; moreover, those best known represent it as a column rising from a confused heap of boulders, thus conveying a completely false idea. Again the weather served us; nothing could be more picturesque than this lone pillar of pale rock lying against a huge black cloud, with the forked lightning playing over its devoted head.⁸³

1863 Benjamin M. Connor

. . . The next notable point in our northwestward march was Chimney Rock—a sandstone which stood straight and tower-like for a great height. In the clear air it seemed near, and some of the soldiers started out to climb it; but

⁸⁰Hammond, *op. cit.*

⁸¹Kenderdine, *op. cit.*

⁸²Charles M. Tuttle, "California Diary," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XV (December 1931), 84.

⁸³Burton, *op. cit.*

they gave up when they found it was still over ten miles away. When we reached the towering column we all fell to deciphering the names and dates cut on almost every portion of its surface that could be reached by even the most agile climbers.⁸⁴

V

"The Oregon Trail" is largely a term of literary convenience. In the largest sense, it started from many points along the Missouri River (Westport, Independence, St. Joseph, Bellevue, Council Bluffs, etc.), and it led to innumerable points westward, in the Rocky Mountains, in Oregon, in Utah, in California, in Nevada, Idaho, and Montana. Thus the Oregon Trail—more properly "the central overland route" or the "Platte route" included a good part of the trans-Mississippi West. But there was one section of this trail through which all connecting lines funneled, one trunk line from each end of which were many branches. This trunk line, which was *the Oregon Trail* or *the California Trail*, etc., to everybody, regardless of origin or destination, extended from Fort Kearny on the Platte, near present Kearney, Nebraska, up the North Platte and up the Sweetwater to South Pass in Wyoming.

Thus landmarks and other historic features of "the Oregon Trail" through this section take on more historic significance, quantitatively if not qualitatively, than do any features on the "feeder lines." In this sense Fort Laramie and Fort Kearny are more significant than Fort Hall or Fort Walla Walla, and landmarks along the North Platte are more significant than those along the Kansas, the Humboldt, the Columbia, or the Sacramento rivers. For comparative purposes, therefore, it seems logical to select landmarks along this "trunk line."

From Fort Kearny to the crossing of South Platte River and over the plateau to the south bank of the North Platte, the country is flat and undistinguished, devoid of distinctive landmarks. From the point of arrival at the North Platte, at Ash Hollow, up the North Platte and thence up the Sweetwater to South Pass, however, there are several notable landmarks, of which eight are outstanding—Ash

⁸⁴Lewis F. Crawford, *Rekindling Campfires. The Exploits of Ben Arnold (Conner)* (Bismarck, 1925), pp. 53-54.

Hollow near Lewellen, Nebraska; Courthouse Rock near Bridgeport; Chimney Rock near Bayard; Scotts Bluff near Gering; Laramie Peak (earlier known as "the Black Hills"), which dominates east-central Wyoming; Independence Rock and Devil's Gate on the Sweetwater; and South Pass itself (not precisely a landmark but an important milestone). Since it seems idle to speculate on the basis of personal impressions alone, the writer has made a careful examination of exactly one hundred contemporary accounts of travelers along the Oregon Trail, to determine which of these great landmarks received the most frequent notice and the most writing space. This objective study, tabulated in the following section, reveals that Chimney Rock is by all odds, statistically at least, the most frequently noted, the most voluminously described, and the most renowned of all these conspicuous Oregon Trail landmarks.

Today, there may or may not be more people who have heard of South Pass or Independence Rock or Scotts Bluff than there are people who have heard of Chimney Rock. The point is, in historic times, in Oregon Trail days, Chimney Rock seems to have been the number one attraction.

Out of the one hundred journals examined, ninety-seven writers—all but three—mention or describe Chimney Rock. Interestingly enough, Scotts Bluff comes out second with a total of seventy-seven references, while Independence Rock places third with sixty-five. The other five features come out about the same, with around fifty references, plus or minus, each.

In addition to the mere tabulation of references it can be stated that, in the heavy majority of instances, passages relating to Chimney Rock are longer than those relating to other features. The inescapable conclusion is that there was no other landmark, by and large, which was more memorable or more excited the imagination.

TABULATION OF CONTEMPORARY REFERENCES
TO MAJOR OREGON TRAIL LANDMARKS

*See quoted references

Reference	Date	Ash Hollow	Courthouse Rock	Chimney Rock	Scott's Bluff	Laramie Peak	Independence Rock	Devil's Gate	South Pass
*Warren A. Ferris	1830			x	x	x	x		
*Captain Bonneville	1832			x	x	x			
*Nathaniel Wyeth	1832			x		x			
William Anderson	1834			x					
Lee & Frost	1834					x	x		
Samuel Parker	1835			x			x		
W. H. Gray	1836				x				
Alfred J. Miller	1837			x	x		x	x	x
Myra F. Eells	1838			x			x		
*Father De Smet	1840			x		x	x		
*John Bidwell	1841			x	x	x	x		x
*Rufus B. Sage	1841	x		x	x	x			
Joseph Williams	1841			x			x		
Medorem Crawford	1842			x			x	x	
*John C. Fremont	1842		x	x	x	x			
Lansford W. Hastings	1842						x		
*Elijah White	1842			x		x	x		x
Johnson & Winter	1843	x		x	x	x	x		x
E. E. Parrish	1844			x					
*J. H. Carleton	1845	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
*Philip St. G. Cooke	1845	x	x	x	x				
Joel Palmer	1845	x		x	x		x	x	x
Frances Parkman	1846	x		x	x	x			
*Virgil R. Pringle	1846		x	x	x				
*J. Q. Thornton	1846	x	x	x	x	x			x
*William Clayton	1847			x	x	x			x
Loren B. Hastings	1847			x	x		x	x	
C. Ingersoll	1847	x		x	x	x	x	x	
Elizabeth D. Smith	1847	x		x	x		x		
J. E. Brown	1849			x	x		x		
J. G. Bruff	1849	x		x		x	x		x
S. B. F. Clark	1849	x	x	x	x		x		x
Osborne Cross	1849	x		x	x	x	x		x
*Lucius Fairchild	1849	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
E. B. Farnham	1849		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
*Isaac Foster	1849			x	x	x	x	x	x
Geiger & Bryarly	1849	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Charles Gould	1849	x	x	x	x				
*J. Hackney	1849	x	x	x	x	x	x		x

Reference	Date	Ash Hollow	Courthouse Rock	Chimney Rock	Scott's Bluff	Laramie Peak	Independence Rock	Devil's Gate	South Pass
*W. G. Johnston	1849	x	x	x	x		x		x
A. P. Josselyn	1849	x		x	x	x			
*William Kelly	1849	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
David R. Leeper	1849	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Martha R. Morgan	1849	x		x	x		x	x	x
J. Sedgley	1849	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
*Howard Stansbury	1849		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Ware's Guide	1849	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Isaac Wistar	1849	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
L. H. Woolley	1849			x				x	x
*James Abbey	1850		x	x	x		x		x
James A. Blood	1850	x	x	x				x	
Andrew Child	1850			x	x		x	x	x
*Henry J. Coke	1850			x	x		x		
William Fouts	1850			x	x				
Margaret Frink	1850	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Orange Gaylord	1850	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Horn's Overland Guide....	1850	x		x	x		x	x	x
E. S. Ingalls	1850	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
George F. Keller	1850	x	x	x	x	x			x
Lemuel McKeeby	1850	x	x	x			x	x	x
Walter G. Pigman	1850		x	x	x		x	x	x
John Steele	1850			x	x	x			x
Franklin Street	1850	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
John Udell	1850			x	x	x			
Thomas Woodward	1850	x		x	x	x			
C. H. Crawford	1851			x			x	x	
W. C. Lobenstine	1851	x	x	x	x				
Cecelia E. Adams	1852	x		x		x	x	x	x
James Akin	1852			x	x		x	x	
E. S. Carter	1852	x		x					x
J. H. Clark	1852	x	x	x	x				
E. W. Conyers	1852		x	x	x		x	x	
Lodiza Frizell	1852		x	x		x	x	x	
Amelia S. Knight	1852		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
John McAllister	1852			x	x		x	x	
Frances H. Sawyer	1852		x	x	x	x			
Thomas Turnbull	1852			x	x		x		x
*W. Wadsworth	1852		x	x	x		x	x	x
Henry Allyn	1853			x	x	x	x	x	x
*David Dinwiddie	1853			x	x	x	x	x	x
*Thomas Flint	1853		x	x	x		x	x	x
Celinda E. Hines	1853	x	x	x	x		x	x	
Phoebe G. Judson	1853			x			x	x	

Reference	Date	Ash Hollow	Courthouse Rock	Chimney Rock	Scott's Bluff	Laramie Peak	Independence Rock	Devil's Gate	South Pass
Linforth & Piercy	1854			x	x				
George McCowen	1854			x	x				
William Chandless	1855	x		x			x	x	x
Helen Carpenter	1856	x	x	x	x				
Moses Sydenham	1856	x	x	x	x				
*Cornelius Conway	1857		x	x					
*Jesse A. Gove	1857		x	x	x				
*T. S. Kenderdine	1858	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Marcy	1859	x	x	x	x			x	x
*Charles M. Tuttle	1859			x	x		x	x	x
J. A. Wilkinson	1859		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
*Richard F. Burton	1860	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
William Earnshaw	1860			x	x	x			
*Benjamin M. Connor	1863		x	x	x				
J. T. Redman	1863		x	x			x	x	
William H. Jackson	1866		x	x	x		x	x	x
Alfred Lambourne	1866		x	x	x	x			
Totals 100.....		44	46	97	77	47	65	46	51

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