



# Chapter One

## Westward Expansion, 1803-1848



The September 3, 1783 Treaty of Paris with Great Britain set the western border of the newly-independent United States of America at the Mississippi River. Figure 1-1 shows the original territory and the changes to the borders that occurred prior to 1861. These border changes are overlaid on a map of current state boundaries. The map shows the significant westward territorial expansion beyond the Mississippi River which is described in this chapter.

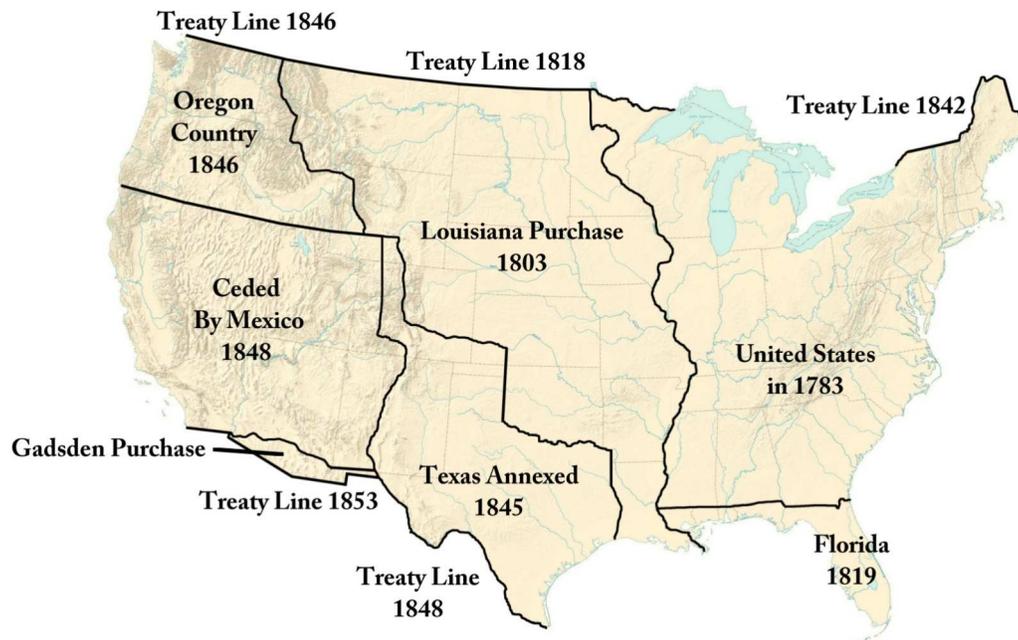


Figure 1-1. Map of the United States showing acquired territories.

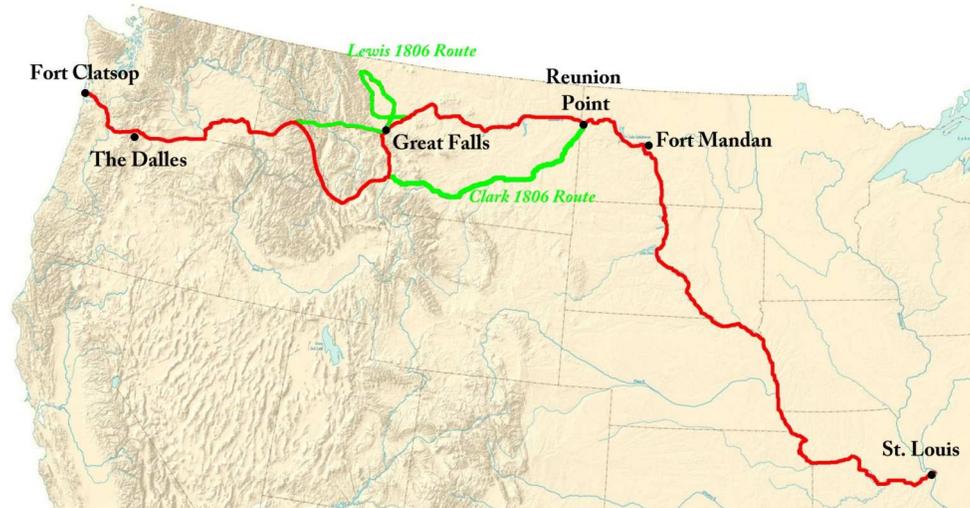
### 1803 Louisiana Purchase

In an effort to assure access along the entire length of the Mississippi River, President Thomas Jefferson initiated discussions with the French Empire of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 for the purchase of New Orleans. Faced with expensive hostilities in Europe, Napoleon offered to sell the entire Louisiana Territory, which included New Orleans, for \$15 million. The American delegates quickly agreed to the purchase on April 30, 1803. Over considerable domestic opposition, the acquisition was ratified by the U.S. Congress on October 31, 1803. The acquired territory labeled as "Louisiana Purchase" in Figure 1-1 was organized into the Territory of Orleans (today's Louisiana) and the vast District of Louisiana.

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Jefferson wasted little time in sending an exploration into the newly-acquired territory. On May 14, 1804, Lewis and Clark left St. Louis, Missouri on their epic journey to the Pacific Ocean. The route they chose was by boat up the Missouri River, which took them on a far northerly track through the Dakotas, Montana and Idaho. Following the northerly route again, the expedition returned to St. Louis on September 23, 1806. Figure 1-2 shows the route that they followed to Oregon and back.



**Figure 1-2. Map of Lewis and Clark's Expedition to the Pacific Coast.**

The boundaries of the United States in 1804 had Spanish Texas, New Mexico and California to the south and west. In the northwest, the Oregon Country was jointly contested by the United States and Great Britain, as was the small Red River Settlement region in the north. In addition, Spain held a small claim in the southeast with its Florida Territory. In 1819, the borders with the Spanish territories were ratified by treaty, and Florida was ceded to the United States. As a part of that agreement, the United States agreed to relinquish all claims to Spanish Texas.

### **The Fur Trade Opens Trails into the Louisiana Purchase**

Lewis and Clark returned from their pioneering transcontinental journey to St. Louis, and the accounts of their experiences, particularly of the wildlife, inspired a wave of fur trappers into the west. The early fur trade consisted of building forts in the wilderness to trade goods for pelts with Native Indians. St. Louis-based Manuel Lisa was among the first Americans to penetrate the upper Missouri River and its tributaries for fur trading. His St. Louis Missouri Fur Company (SLMFC) established Fort Raymond at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Big Horn Rivers (in today's Montana) in July 1807, and enjoyed considerable financial success.

That success attracted competition, and John Jacob Astor's mighty American Fur Company (AFC) decided to enter the western fur trade through a subsidiary called the Pacific Fur Company (PFC). In September 1810, Astor sent the ship *Tonquin* from New York to Oregon via Cape Horn, with a crew of thirty-four. Upon her arrival at the Columbia River in March 1811, the crew set about building Fort Astoria on the site of present-day Astoria, Oregon. Also in March 1811, the PFC sent an overland expedition up the Missouri River under the command of Wilson Price Hunt. Once up the river, Hunt's party moved overland in a westerly direction, crossing the Continental Divide at Union Pass (in today's

western Wyoming), and continued on to Oregon via the Snake and Columbia Rivers. In February 1812, they reached Fort Astoria. The overland party, under the command of Robert Stuart, then left the fort in June 1812 and returned to St Louis in May 1813. Along the way, they discovered a crossing of the Continental Divide at South Pass (in today's southwestern Wyoming), which would become the main gateway for overland trips in later years. As a result of the War of 1812, the British acquired Fort Astoria in 1813, and it later became an important post of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Table 1-1 lists the earliest known fur trade trips, and shows their focus on the Upper Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. These fur trade brigades traveled by keelboat up the Missouri River to its confluence with the Yellowstone River at the border between North Dakota and Montana. They then traveled southwest on the Yellowstone to the Big Horn River. Unfortunately, the Indian tribes of the Upper Missouri aligned with the British during the War of 1812, and hostilities curtailed all organized American fur trading activities from 1812 until 1821.

**Table 1-1. Earliest Fur Trade Trips up the Missouri River**

<b>Party</b>	<b>Departed</b>	<b>Route</b>	<b>Arrived</b>
Lewis & Clark Expedition	St. Louis May 14, 1804 Oregon Mar 23, 1806	Missouri River & Oregon Upper Missouri River	Oregon Dec 7, 1805 St. Louis Sep 23, 1806
Manuel Lisa (SLMFC)	St. Louis Apr 1807 Ft. Raymond Jul 1808	Missouri to Big Horn Yellowstone & Missouri Rivers	Ft. Raymond Jul 1807 St. Louis Aug 1808
Manuel Lisa (SLMFC)	St. Louis May 17, 1809 Ft. Raymond Jul 1809	Missouri & Yellowstone Rivers Yellowstone & Missouri Rivers	Ft. Raymond 1809 St. Louis Oct 1809
Wilson Hunt (PFC)	St. Louis Mar 11, 1811 Ft. Astoria Jun 29, 1812	Overland via Union Pass Overland via South Pass	Oregon Feb 15, 1812 St. Louis May 5, 1813
Manuel Lisa (SLMFC)	St. Louis Mar 30, 1811	Missouri & Yellowstone Rivers Yellowstone & Missouri Rivers	Ft. Raymond Jun 1811 St. Louis Oct 1811
Manuel Lisa (SLMFC)	St. Louis May 6, 1812	Upper Missouri River Missouri River	Mandan Villages St. Louis Jun 1, 1813
J. Pilcher (MFC)	St. Louis Spring 1821	Missouri & Yellowstone Rivers	Big Horn Summer 1821
Andrew Henry (Ashley)	St. Louis Apr 3, 1822	Missouri & Yellowstone Rivers	Ft. Henry Sep 1822
Louis Bompert (MFC)	St. Louis May 13, 1822	Missouri & Yellowstone Rivers	Ft. Benton

Note: the SLMFC was the St Louis Missouri Fur Company, which was succeeded by the Missouri Fur Company (MFC) in 1821. The PFC was Astor's Pacific Fur Company.

### The Fur Trade Moves Westward to the Rockies

Another St Louis-based competitor, General William Ashley, entered the fur business in 1822, intending to capture a significant portion of the Missouri River business from Manuel Lisa's successor, the Missouri Fur Company. Ashley's plans were thwarted by a June 1823 battle with the Mandan Indians at the Arikara Villages (on the Missouri River in today's northern South Dakota), which stopped his progress up the river. Not to be deterred, Ashley sent an overland trapping expedition west into the Rockies under the command of Jedediah Smith and William Sublette, thus forming the foundation for what would become

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**William Sublette, 1799-1848**

- Led first trapping party to the Rockies, 1823-26
- Purchased Ashley's interests with Smith and Jackson, 1826
- Led supply caravan to 3rd rendezvous in 1827
- Sold fur trade interests to RMFC in 1830
- Trading expedition to Santa Fe in 1831
- Led supply train with Wyeth to rendezvous in 1832
- Built Fort William (Laramie) in 1834
- 1843 - Final trip to the Rockies

the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. This party crossed at South Pass and trapped for beaver in the Green River region until 1825. This was the first time that an organized party of American trappers had gone into the wilderness to hunt directly, and raised the logistical problems of re-supply and getting the furs back to market. Ashley solved these problems by sending a supply train to the first fur trade rendezvous at Henry Fork in June 1825. There, he sold supplies at attractive margins to the trappers and purchased their furs from them at low

prices. Ashley transported the furs back to St Louis where he could sell them at a significant profit, and the trappers stayed in the mountains for another year of trapping. This business model proved so profitable that annual fur trade rendezvous meetings continued until 1840.

Table 1-2 below details the earliest fur trade rendezvous trips.

**Table 1-2. Earliest Fur Trade Rendezvous Trips**

Party	Departed	Route	Arrived
Smith/Sublette (Ashley)	Ft. Kiowa Sep 1823 Green River Jun 1824	Overland via South Pass Platte River	Green River Mar 19, 1824 St. Louis Sep 1824
Supply Train (Ashley)	Council Bluffs Nov 3, 1824 Henry Fork Jul 7, 1825	Platte River & Bridger Pass Missouri & Yellowstone Rivers	Henry Fork Jun 29, 1825 St. Louis Oct 4, 1825
Jedediah Smith (Ashley)	St. Louis Oct 29, 1825 Willow Valley Aug 16, 1826	Colorado River	Willow Valley Jun 1826 California Nov 27, 1827
Supply Train (Ashley)	St. Louis Mar 8, 1826 Bear River Jul 18, 1826	Platte River Road & South Pass South Pass & Platte River Road	Ham's Fork May 25, 1826 St. Louis Sep 26, 1826
<b>Ashley sold out to Smith, Jackson &amp; Sublette (SJS) at the July 1826 rendezvous</b>			
Supply Train (SJS)	St. Louis Mar 26, 1827 Bear Lake Aug 1, 1828	Platte River Road & South Pass South Pass & Platte River Road	Bear Lake Jul 1, 1827 St. Louis Oct 6, 1828

Table 1-2 shows that, initially, the Ashley supply caravans left St Louis in the fall of each year and wintered in the mountains. They then trapped until the following summer rendezvous and returned with the furs in the fall. Starting in 1826, the fur trade caravans left in the spring of each year and returned in the fall of that same year. They used the Platte River road from a jumping off point along the lower Missouri River (typically Independence, Missouri) to the Rocky Mountains. This route followed the banks of the Platte River and the North Fork of the Platte River to South Pass and then into the trapping areas, and became the foundation for both the later Oregon and California emigration trails. Figure 1-3 shows this trail, along with the locations of the 1825-1840 Fur Trade rendezvous meetings.

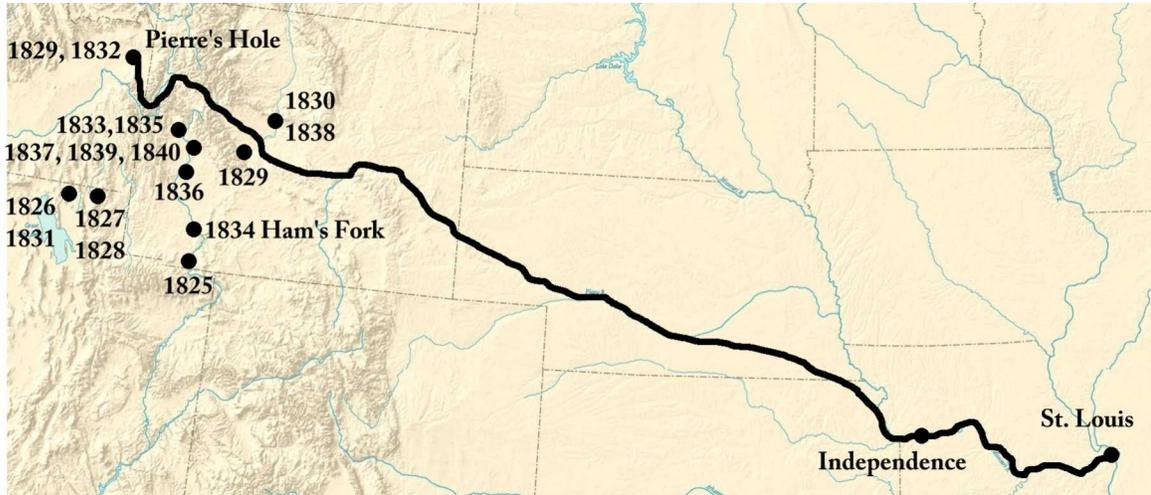


Figure 1-3. Map of the Platte River Road and Fur Trade Rendezvous.

Ashley's financial success was noted by other fur trade companies, who hurried to adopt the new business model of sending trappers into the wilderness, and using the annual rendezvous to re-supply and gather furs. By 1834, five competing fur trade companies were vying for business at the rendezvous: the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, the American Fur Company, the Hudson's Bay Company, Nathaniel Wyeth's Columbia River Fishing & Trading Company, and the Bonneville Fur Company.

Typically, only one to three caravans were sent each year (by competing fur trade companies), all departing from St Louis in the March to May period. This was because the caravans travelled in large groups for safety from Indian attacks, and set out only after there was enough prairie grass to feed their horses. The two to three month trip from St Louis also meant that most of the rendezvous meetings were held in June-August.

Early settlers and missionaries, particularly those going overland to Oregon, accompanied fur trade caravans to the annual rendezvous, and then continued with a returning Hudson's Bay Company fur trade caravan to Oregon from the rendezvous.

The fur trade experienced intense competition in 1834-36, followed in 1836-37 by a consolidation that left two major contestants: Astor's American Fur Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. However, a precipitous decline in demand for beaver pelts meant the effective end of the business by 1840. No further rendezvous were held after the June 1840 meeting at the Green River.

### Further Westward Expansion, 1845-48

Spain lost its Mexican colonies to independence in 1821, so the United States found itself with a new neighbor. In the 1820s, Mexico encouraged American immigration to Texas in an effort to populate its northern region. The Americans quickly became the majority, and seceded from Mexico in 1836. The new Republic of Texas favored annexation to the United States, but faced initial opposition from the U.S. Congress.

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In 1844, James Polk was elected President with a popular mandate to acquire both Texas and Oregon. Polk was also highly intrigued by Mexico's Alta California province, and was concerned that the Pacific coast might fall under the dominion of Great Britain. After failed negotiations to purchase Texas, New Mexico and California from Mexico in November 1845, Polk set a plan into action to forcefully acquire those territories.

Texas was admitted as a state on December 29, 1845, and this precipitated conflict with Mexico, which still claimed Texas as part of its sovereign territory. The United States sent troops to the Rio Grande River to protect its new state, and fighting soon broke out. Consequently, war was declared with Mexico on May 13, 1846. Polk had anticipated this in 1845 by sending naval forces to the coast of California and a small force under Colonel John Frémont overland to California.

The war was disastrous for Mexico. General Stephen Kearny's Army of the West captured Santa Fe, New Mexico on August 18, 1846 before proceeding to California, and the Mexican forces in California surrendered to Frémont on January 13, 1847. The final blow was the loss of Mexico City to General Winfield Scott on May 1, 1847. With few options left, Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848, which ended hostilities but ceded Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada and Alta California to the United States.

As shown in Figure 1-1, the United States and Great Britain also had a number of territorial disputes, some of which were resolved by the Treaty of 1818. That agreement established the joint occupation and settlement of the Oregon Territory, and traded British territory around the Red River Settlement for American claims above the 49th parallel in Canada's Alberta province.

The two countries then engaged in a race to control Oregon, with the United States sending numerous missionaries and settlers to the region in 1834-43, and Great Britain's Hudson's Bay Company establishing commercial dominance in the area. This rivalry culminated in the June 15, 1846 agreement to divide the disputed territory along the 49th parallel, with the United States gaining full control of the southern portion encompassing today's states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

In the span of just 45 years, the United States had more than tripled its territory. The major issue remaining was how to settle and incorporate the new territory. Postal communication would play a crucial enabling role in that consolidation.

### **Settling the Western Territories**

After the fur trade blazed the trails across the western wilderness from 1825 to 1833, four major waves of emigration from the United States populated the West from 1843 to 1860. Sporadic missionaries and settlers went west in the intervening decade of 1833 to 1843, but specific events spurred the greater movement westward in 1843 and afterwards.

The first major emigration was to Oregon, spurred by reports from returning missionaries and advocates for settlement such as Jason Lee, Hall Kelley and Marcus Whitman. In addition, Oregon passed the Organic Laws in July 1843, which allowed each settler a claim of up to 160 acres. Consequently, a growing number of emigrants in 1843 increased markedly in 1844 and beyond.

While large numbers of emigrants went to Oregon in 1843-45, a small number split off for California. In 1846, this number increased dramatically (and actually exceeded the number going to Oregon that year), but included the ill-fated Donner Party, whose fate was well publicized back east. Consequently, the number of emigrants to California decreased markedly in 1847-48. However, news of the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in January 1848 reached New York in August 1848, and precipitated a massive emigration to California in 1849 and beyond.

Persecution of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (popularly known as the Mormon Church) drove its members from their homes in the East to Nauvoo, Illinois in 1838. Continued troubles and the after-effects of the murder of Joseph Smith in June 1844 led to the expulsion of the Mormons from Illinois in February 1846. Their new leader, Brigham Young, then led them to safety in Winter Quarters on the west bank of the Missouri River in today's Nebraska. Young decided that they should settle on land not wanted by anyone else, and identified the Great Salt Lake valley (owned by Mexico at that time) as the best location for permanent settlement. Accordingly, the first Mormon emigrant train left Winter Quarters on April 5, 1847 and followed the north bank of the Platte River to South Pass. It then proceeded via Fort Bridger to Salt Lake, where its advance elements arrived on July 21, 1847.

Table 1-3 shows the numbers of emigrants to California, Oregon and Utah from 1840 to 1860, as estimated by Unruh in *The Plains Across*. During the same period of time, the U.S. population grew from 17 million in 1840 to 31 million in 1860.

**Table 1-3. Annual Overland Emigration to the West**

Year	California	Oregon	Utah	Year	California	Oregon	Utah
1840	0	13	0	1851	1,100	3,600	1,500
1841	34	24	0	1852	50,000	10,000	10,000
1842	0	125	0	1853	20,000	7,500	8,000
1843	38	875	0	1854	12,000	6,000	3,200
1844	53	1,475	0	1855	1,500	500	4,700
1845	260	2,500	0	1856	8,000	1,000	2,400
1846	1,500	1,200	0	1857	4,000	1,500	1,300
1847	450	4,000	2,200	1858	6,000	1,500	150
1848	400	1,300	2,400	1859	17,000	2,000	1,400
1849	25,000	450	1,500	1860	9,000	1,500	1,600
1850	44,000	6,000	2,500	<b>totals</b>	200,300	53,000	42,900

The fourth wave of emigrants was to Colorado from 1858 to 1860, prompted by the discovery of gold in the Pike's Peak region. By the time of the 1860 census, there were nearly 35,000 settlers, mostly concentrated around the burgeoning town of Denver.

### Early Letter Communications with the West

Communication with the new western territories was difficult before 1850. Regular routes were only just being established and opportunities to send mail were infrequent and unreliable. Correspondents had a

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choice of sending their letters by sea around Cape Horn, or overland. Of necessity, their communications relied on private parties travelling to or from the West. Chapters Two through Five describe the various options in detail.

From 1825 to 1840, the only possibility for mail to or from the mountains was by fur trade supply caravan. Figure 1-4 shows an extraordinary example carried back from the 1832 fur trade rendezvous.

The writer was Nathaniel Wyeth, a Boston ice merchant who was trying to get into the fur trade and salmon fishing businesses. His party, which was travelling to Oregon, had been escorted to the rendezvous

by William Sublette, who led the only fur trade supply caravan that year. They left Independence, Missouri on May 13, 1832 and arrived at the Pierre's Hole rendezvous (in today's eastern Idaho) on July 8. Wyeth stayed until July 24, and then left for Oregon.

### Nathaniel J. Wyeth, 1802-1856

- May-July 1832 trip to 1832 fur trade rendezvous with Sublette
- Traveled to Fort Vancouver, Oregon, 1832
- Stayed with McLoughlin (HBC), October 1832-February 1833
- Traveled from Oregon to 1833 rendezvous, February-July 1833
- Returned to Massachusetts from July to November 1833
- Led supply caravan to 1834 rendezvous, April-June 1834
- Established Fort Hall trading post in July 1834
- Stayed in Oregon, September 1834 to June 1836
- Returned to Mass. via Taos, June-November 1836



Before leaving, he wrote this short July 14 note to his brother, complaining about desertions among his men, but expressing optimism that he could make money in the fur trade, "after learning the business." He endorsed it "fav(or) of Mr. Wm L. Sublette" and entrusted it to Sublette for the return journey to St Louis. Following a skirmish with Black Feet Indians, known as the Battle of Pierre's Hole, Sublette left the rendezvous with this letter on July 30 and arrived back in St Louis on October 3. He

mailed it unpaid on October 5 in St Louis. It was rated 25 cents due for the greater than 400 miles from St. Louis to Baltimore. This is the earliest known trans-Rocky Mountains letter.

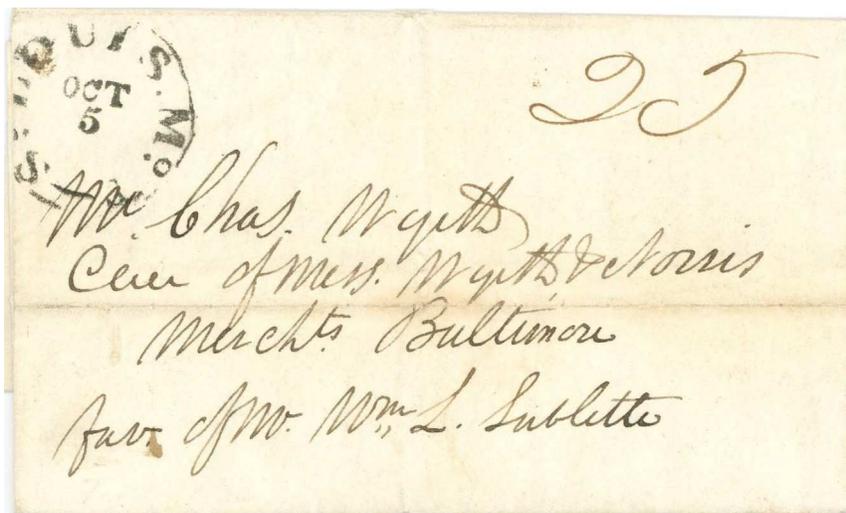


Figure 1-4. Letter dated July 14, 1832 from Pierre's Hole rendezvous, and carried to St Louis by fur trader William Sublette.



Figure 1-5. John Clymer's painting of Sublette's supply train returning from the July 1832 Pierre's Hole rendezvous. Sublette's arm is in a sling from a wound incurred at the Battle of Pierre's Hole.

Wyeth spent the winter of 1832-33 as a guest of John McLoughlin, chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver, Oregon. While there, he wrote the January 1833 letter illustrated as Figure 3-17 in Chapter Three. He returned east with an HBC fur trade brigade, which left on February 3 and arrived at the 1833 Green River rendezvous (in today's western Wyoming) on July 16. While there, he contracted with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company to supply them at the 1834 rendezvous, and returned to St Louis on October 29, 1833 by boat trip along the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers. The following year, Wyeth's supply train left Independence, Missouri on April 28, 1834, but arrived on June 17 - four days after the competition, so he was not able to profitably sell his goods or buy beaver pelts at the rendezvous. Figure 1-6 shows a letter that he wrote at the 1834 rendezvous.



Figure 1-6. Letter datelined June 21, 1834 from the Ham's Fork rendezvous, and carried to St Louis by fur trader Michael Cerré.

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This letter was datelined "Ham's Fork of the Colorado of the West Latt. 41°, 45' Long. 112°, 35' W. June 21st 1834" (near today's Granger, Wyoming). In this short letter to his wife, Wyeth expresses uncertainty that his fur business will succeed. He left the rendezvous on July 1 with his supplies, and established Fort Hall in Idaho to sell the goods and trade with the natives. Before leaving, he entrusted this letter to Michael Cerré of the Bonneville Fur Company, who left the rendezvous on July 10 and arrived in St Louis in late August. Cerré gave the letter to St Louis merchants and forwarders Von Phul and McGill, who posted the letter unpaid on September 1. It was rated 25 cents due for the greater than 400 miles to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where it arrived on September 16. It was then forwarded twice within Massachusetts for 12 cents in additional postal charges.

Figure 3-21 in Chapter Three also illustrates an 1839 letter carried by missionaries to Oregon, who were escorted there by fur trade brigades.

### **Evolution of Postal Communications**

The growing numbers of settlers in the West demanded adequate letter communications with the United States. Initially, this need was met by private expresses and forwarders that charged a premium fee for the letters that they carried.

The U.S. post office was slow to move into the new western territories. In some cases, such as Astoria and Salt Lake City, official post offices were established, but routes connecting them to the rest of the United States were not put in place until much later. This led to an interesting situation, where postmasters entered into special mail contracts, typically with expressmen already carrying private mails, to carry post office mails on a trip by trip basis for the amount of U.S. postage carried. These "special contract mails" ended when the post office signed route contracts to carry the mails on a regular basis to one of these orphan post offices. The first western postal route contracts were signed in 1850 for the Salt Lake City and Santa Fe routes, as described more fully herein. Special contract mails are known as late as 1860 in Colorado.

Accordingly, this book is organized by pre-contract and post-contract periods for the major postal routes between the United States and the West. The pre-contract period is organized by major destination: southwest to Santa Fe, by sea or overland to Oregon, by sea or overland to California, and overland to Salt Lake City along the Central Route.

The contract period is organized by post office route contract: by sea via Panama, overland on the Central Route, overland on the Southern Route, overland to Santa Fe, and by sea via Tehuantepec, Mexico. Some topics are considered separately, such as Colorado mails and the Pony Express, which had intertwined private and contract mails.