

John C. Fremont: Explorer, Plant Collector and Politician

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John Charles Fremont played a very historic role in exploration of the western lands which eventually became states of the U. S. A. He was the discoverer of a number of previously unknown trees, shrubs and other plants of the western states, a prime example being *Populus fremontii*, the species of Cottonwood that is the subject of the preceding article in this issue of *Desert Plants*. Fremont was an officer in the U. S. Army with training as a topographical engineer. As such he was often placed in charge of exploring expeditions. Historians agree that Fremont was often "in the right place at the right time." Like the Swedish botanist Linnaeus of the previous century, he had something of a "propensity for self-eulogy." Upon climbing a high peak in the Wind River Range, for example, he planted the American flag and named the mountain "Fremont's Peak." He was skilled at putting bashfulness aside. Maps soon had other names such as "Fremont Lake" and "Fremont Pass."

Although Fremont claimed to have "discovered" the Great Salt Lake and even likened himself in this regard to Balboa discovering the Pacific, historians agree that this and other "discoveries" were probably previously known to trappers, traders, missionaries, immigrants or other private citizens. His detractors claim that Fremont "officially" discovered a great number of physiographic features by being the first topographer to place them on a map! He began his explorations in 1838 as a lieutenant attached to Joseph Nicolas Nicollet's surveys of the basins of the upper Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Nicollet was a celebrated astronomer and topographer who had emigrated from France to North America. Fremont was duly impressed with the respect (and even awe) afforded Nicollet as a famous personage. Apparently while working as Nicollet's assistant, Fremont was not only serving a technical apprenticeship, but was either consciously or subconsciously acting as an understudy, — learning how to command respect as a famous and celebrated personage!

Fremont was quick to learn that it was not the trapper, trader or frontiersman who received credit for discoveries, but rather the person who performed the technical niceties of determining the longitude and latitude. While exploring with Nicollet, Fremont found that new plants were "discovered" by pressing and drying leaves, flowers or other diagnostic parts and submitting them to an expert professor at a botanical garden or college for "naming." Apparently Fremont learned how to make such herbarium specimens from the German botanist Karl Andreas ("Charles") Geyer. Nicollet, at his own expense, had hired Geyer to accompany the expedition and prepare herbarium specimens at the stops. Fremont must have gotten to know Geyer very well on this trip. During later explorations Fremont frequently made herbarium specimens of noteworthy plants with notes on the latitude and longitude where each was discovered. Many of these are still extant. Some valuable collections were lost, however, for example when a mule carrying the specimens fell off a cliff into a deep canyon and when a boat with specimens was lost in a raging river. Obviously, Fremont himself was exposed to similar dangers, so his accomplishments should not be minimized.

We suspect that much of Fremont's life was greatly influenced by his internship with the famous Frenchman Nicollet and the German Geyer. He apparently learned to associate science and technical knowledge with foreigners and to associate ignorance and uncouthness with the native-born backwoodsmen who were the typical Americans of the day. His



Engraving of John Charles Fremont, from a photograph about 1860.

J.C. Fremont.

spelling of Fremont with an accent on the first syllable is considered by many to be an affectation since he was born in Savannah, Georgia. The New York botanist John Torrey, when first learning that herbarium specimens were being made by someone named Frémont in the west, wrote somewhat excit-

edly to fellow botanist Asa Gray at Harvard University. A revealing sentence written by Torrey to Gray noted that Fremont wrote "something like a foreigner" but signed his letter with the title of Lieutenant in the Topographical Engineers of the U. S. Army. Who was this collector of herbarium specimens? Was he some famous French explorer? Or was he a home-grown American? Although actually the latter, his burning desire to be something out of the ordinary would put his



Civil War patriotic envelope with likeness of Major General John C. Fremont, postmarked Paducah, Kentucky, February 6, 1862. Sent to Mr. W. Fugate, Bushnell (McDonough County) Illinois. At the beginning of the Civil War, Fremont was appointed Major General of the Western Department of the Army with headquarters at St. Louis. Unable to restrain the popular sentiment of Missourians for volunteering for duty with the Confederacy, he was removed for political reasons. To satisfy demands of his supporters, he was finally allowed to assume command of the Army of the Mountain Department of Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee in 1862. This 1862 envelope from Kentucky shows his local support. He was very famous as an explorer and collector of herbarium specimens and eventually became Governor of Arizona Territory. Envelope in collection of Frank S. Crosswhite.

name into newspapers around the world.

Fremont married well. His wife was the former Jessie Benton, daughter of senator Thomas Hart Benton, an influential politician. The senator secured appointments for Fremont to lead several significant westward exploring expeditions. One of Fremont's much-publicized trips was the first government exploring expedition to the Pacific Coast after the Lewis and Clark expedition organized some forty years previously by Thomas Jefferson. Senator Benton was a great advocate of the United States expanding into the western part of the continent. After all, wasn't this manifest destiny? Fremont seemed at all times to be a swashbuckling adventurer. Some of his deeds would surely have gotten a lesser man into trouble. For example, on one occasion he took one of the army's cannons on one of his expeditions, totally without any authority or permission to do so.

Fremont participated prominently in the seizure of California from Mexico. He supported Commander Robert Stockton in a quarrel with General Philip Kearny over lines of authority

in the seized territory, with the result that Stockton appointed him Governor of California. Unfortunately, after Fremont served briefly as governor, orders from Washington established Kearney's authority without contradiction. As a result, Fremont was arrested, court-martialled and found guilty of mutiny, disobedience, and conduct prejudicial to military discipline. Fortunately, President Polk intervened and allowed Fremont to resign.

During Fremont's brief residence in California he had obtained a deed to 40,000 acres directly from the Mexican authorities before any land was transferred to the United States. Because the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ended the Mexican War specifically called on the United States to honor all pre-existing deeds and grants of land in the ceded territories, the U. S. Supreme Court affirmed Fremont as owner of the land. This was an extremely important decision because the richest of the gold lodes of Mariposa County happened to run directly through the property, making Fremont a millionaire several times over!

Among the numerous herbarium specimens which Fremont made in his explorations of the western lands, was Greasewood, the valuable forage plant of plains and high desert. Dr. John Torrey, perhaps the best-known American botanist of the day, attempted to honor the collector by naming it *Fremontia vermicularis*. Eventually Torrey discovered that the new genus had previously been described by Nees von Esenbeck under the name *Sarcobatus* and that the name *Fremontia* was thus invalid. Determined to honor Fremont in any event, Torrey later applied the name *Fremontia* to a rare plant of Arizona and California in the Cocoa Family, Sterculiaceae. This species, *Fremontia californica*, is known as Flannel-Bush or sometimes California Slippery Elm. Like true Slippery Elm (*Ulmus fulva*), although taxonomically unrelated, its bark has been used to relieve sore throat. Because a later homonym of the first proposed *Fremontia* (= *Sarcobatus*), the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature would ordinarily require us to reject *Fremontia* as a name for the second genus. Therefore, Frederick Coville, in the Report on the Botany of the Death Valley Expedition in 1893, proposed *Fremontodendron* as a substitute name whereby the Flannel-Bush could still legitimately honor Fremont. This proved not quite good enough. Botanists proved to be so stubborn in using the name *Fremontia*, even though technically incorrect, that a subsequent International Botanical Congress voted to declare the name a *nomen conservandum*, essentially declaring the incorrect name correct! This was after Fremont's own style! Rules be damned! Surely he would have been greatly pleased! As if to cast an even stronger vote for Fremont, the California Native Plant Society has chosen the genus name *Fremontia* for the name of its quarterly journal!

Unfortunately, during Fremont's own time, there were not enough botanists to stack the deck during a different election. In the race for President of the United States in 1856 Fremont was the candidate of a brand-new political group—the Republican Party. Unfortunately the new party lost the general election to James Buchanan. Fremont would have been President of the United States if a mere 31 electoral votes had gone to him rather than Buchanan. But the political party for which he had been the premier candidate did eventually elect a candidate in 1860, a country lawyer named Abraham Lincoln.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861 Fremont was in Paris. He immediately purchased a large quantity of arms for the Union government and arrived back in the United States in June. In July Fremont was commissioned a major-general and given command of the Western Department of the Army, headquartered at St. Louis, Missouri. He found it extremely difficult to organize an effective northern army in Missouri, which essentially was a slave state. Large numbers of Confederate troops were collecting in southeastern Missouri. From western Missouri came a large number of Confederate volunteers who were poised to attack Cairo and St. Louis. There were numerous skirmishes between loyal and disloyal Missourians. After some initial failures, Fremont saw that he needed to take a firmer grip on Missouri. He issued a proclamation on August 30, 1861 declaring that Missourians bearing arms in rebellion would be shot, their property confiscated and their slaves emancipated! Such an emancipation proclamation was considered by Lincoln to be a presidential prerogative and not up to a mere major-general to declare. One Confederate General announced a counter-

proclamation to the effect that for each Missourian shot he would hang, draw and quarter one Union man. Hoping to keep the loyalty of the border states and to imply that slave-owners could still be good citizens of the Union, Lincoln removed Fremont from his command. But then due to an outcry by his supporters, Fremont was given command of the Mountain Department of the Army in Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee in 1862. Eventually this army was united with the Army of the Potomac to form the new Army of Virginia under General John Pope. Although Fremont was to continue to be in charge of his particular corps, he objected to being placed under an officer who he actually out-ranked. In protest he resigned and the resignation was accepted.

Although again nominated for the presidency by the radical wing of the Republican Party in 1864, Fremont withdrew to avoid a split in the party, thus throwing his support behind Abraham Lincoln. Fremont's political luck was mixed to say the least. Back in 1849 he had been elected one of the first two senators from California, but drawing the short term, served only until March, 1851. His opposition to slavery had resulted in his defeat for re-election by the pro-slavery element in California.

After Lincoln was re-elected in 1864, Fremont withdrew from public life and devoted his attentions to building a transcontinental railroad to the Pacific Coast by a southern route. Years before, his government-sponsored explorations had been designed to seek appropriate routes for transportation corridors to the west coast. Long convinced of the value of rail travel to California, Fremont decided to put his own fortune on the line to create the needed railroad. Unfortunately, Fremont's railroad collapsed in bankruptcy and he lost the personal fortune which he had made in California.

Financially broken, Fremont was offered an appointment as Governor of Arizona Territory in 1878. He accepted the position and lived in Arizona as Governor until 1881. Details of his life in Arizona are preserved in the Charlotte Hall Museum and Library at Prescott, Arizona, the territorial capital when Fremont was governor. The historic Fremont House in downtown Tucson preserves a building where he stayed while he was in southern Arizona. It is open to the public.

Residents of Arizona are reminded of Fremont not only by Flannel-Bush (*Fremontia*) or Cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), but by many other plants named for him which are native to the state. Examples which come to mind are *Amphipappus fremontii* and *Chaenactis fremontii* in the Daisy Family, *Berberis fremontii* in the Barberry Family, *Chenopodium fremontii* in the Goosefoot Family, *Dalea fremontii* in the Pea Family, *Gentiana fremontii* in the Gentian Family, *Geranium fremontii* in the Cranesbill Family, *Lepidium fremontii* in the Mustard Family, *Lycium fremontii* in the Nightshade Family, and *Phacelia fremontii* in the Waterleaf Family.

It has been easy for historians to minimize Fremont's achievements and to paint him as a mere opportunist. Perhaps the present article reflects this attitude too strongly. In actuality he was a strong catalyst. He also was a strong decision maker. If he had never lived, the entire history of the western portion of the continent might have been much different. Mormon settlers followed his maps directly to the Great Salt Lake. Hundreds of thousands of settlers followed in his footsteps to California. Truly "from the ashes of his campfires sprang cities."