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PIONEER EMIGRANT TRAFFIC TO CITY OF ROCKS

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In 1840, Missouri had a Western Emigration Society with some 500 members interested in going to settle in California. There they would get away from malaria epidemics and live in a country (at that time part of Mexico) with abundant resources and a superior climate. But when they were supposed to assemble a few miles west of Kansas City, May 9, 1841, John Bidwell was practically alone as a member prepared to go. Other emigrants began to show up, though, and Bidwell's group gradually made their way to Soda Springs, a prominent Bear River attraction where their guide--Thomas Fitzpatrick who actually was taking Pierre Jean DeSmet and some Jesuit missionaries to an Oregon destination--sent them down Bear River to see if they could find their way to California. About half of their party decided to go on to Fort Hall and western Oregon, thirty-two of them joined Bidwell to continue to their California paradise.¹

They ran into a lot of trouble. They had ox teams and wagons (standard equipment for later emigrants), and although supply wagons for trappers had gone west over South Pass as early as 1830, and although Narcissa P. Whitman and Eliza Hart Spalding had gotten as far as Fort Boise in a wagon in 1836, Bidwell's crew found that wagons could not get through rough desert country north of Salt Lake. They finally managed to overcome a lot of hardship and reach California, but a practical trail route was needed.² Twelve of Bidwell's party then joined Joseph B. Chiles (who had caught up with Bidwell to go to California) on a return trip to find a passable route in 1842. Avoiding Bonneville Salt Flats and other impractical barriers, Chiles decided to go through Granite Pass and City of Rocks.³ Here he had a potential wagon road for another California Trail expedition in 1843. Chiles continued to explore new route possibilities on his way back to California that summer, but he engaged Joseph R. Walker to take his main wagon party from Snake River up Raft River to City of Rocks and Granite Pass, a route that from then on became Idaho's California Trail segment. Walker had brought a band of trappers back from California down Goose Creek west of Granite Pass, which he had seen from a distance in 1834. Goose Creek did not provide a satisfactory road for emigrant wagons, but Walker knew how to find Granite Pass via City of Rocks.⁴

A number of California Trail alternates eventually were developed to accommodate California Trail traffic between South Pass and Upper Humboldt River options.

But all of them had to come past City of Rocks and Granite Pass. On that account, City of Rocks became an especially notable California Trail attraction.

ENDNOTES

¹George R. Stewart, *The California Trail: An Epic With Many Heroes* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1962), 7-20.

²Ibid., 20-28.

³City of Rocks and Granite Pass, Idaho State Historical Society Reference Series Number 126.

⁴Stewart, 47-48; Douglas S. Watson, *West Wind: The Life of Joseph Reddeford Walker* (Los Angeles, 1934).

(This information has not been edited.)

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