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DISCOVERY OF A WAGON ROAD FROM SALT LAKE CITY TO CITY OF ROCKS

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As late as 1848, a year after Mormon settlers established their new homeland in Utah, a practical wagon road from Salt Lake west to Humboldt River remained undiscovered. John Bidwell's original California Trail party had come west across Bonneville Salt Flats in 1841, but they had no trouble ascertaining that they had not found a wagon road useful for future California Trail traffic. Bidwell's crew had to abandon their wagons and complete their long journey with a pack string.¹ Then in 1846, Lansford Hastings had promoted a route from Fort Bridger to Salt Lake and on west to Humboldt River, but Jacob and George Donner's wagon train simply verified what Bidwell's company already knew.

After serious difficulty reaching Salt Lake via Hastings route, they had to abandon their wagons altogether while trying to cross Bonneville Salt Flats. Proceeding on as a pack train Donner's group ran into a still worse disaster at Donner Lake in California that winter.² At that point, no practical route from Salt Lake for wagon traffic to California had been identified short of going north to Fort Hall and then following Joseph R. Chile's California Trail to Raft River, City of Rocks, and Granite Pass.

After Brigham Young's Mormon followers had settled in Utah, some kind of improved access to Humboldt River and California clearly was needed. Samuel J. Hensley provided that route in 1848. He originally had come west to California with John Bidwell in 1841, so he knew that he had to stay north of Salt Lake and Bonneville Salt Flat when he was making another trip west of Salt Lake in 1848. So he identified a practical wagon route from Salt Lake northwest to City of Rocks and Granite Pass just in time to meet a battalion of Mormons whom H. W. Bigler was bringing from California back to Salt Lake. With Hensley's directions, Bigler learned that he did not have to take his seventeen wagons clear to Fort Hall in order to find a suitable road to his destination.³ That saved him a long detour and opened an alternate California Trail route just in time to accommodate part of a wild gold rush in 1849. Most of California's 1849 stampede came by way of Fort Hall or Hudspeth's Cutoff, but some went out of their way to Fort Bridger and Salt Lake. Their Salt Lake alternate gave them a good supply route that also included an opportunity to see part of Idaho's City of Rocks. Some 25,000

members of California's 1849-1850 gold rush parties came past Salt Lake, and most of them proceeded on to Granite Pass by way of City of Rocks.⁴

ENDNOTES

¹Rockwell D. Hunt, *John Bidwell: Prince of California Pioneers* (Caldwell: Caxton Printers, 1942).

²George R. Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party* (New York, 1936).

³L. A. Fleming and A. R. Standing, "The Road to Fortune: The Salt Lake Cutoff," *Utah Historical Quarterly* (Summer 1965), 33:249-252. This Salt Lake alternate between Granite Pass and Brigham City was generally referred to as a cutoff because it did not go to Fort Hall, but that long detour was what was cut off. For California Trail traffic generally, that Salt Lake route formed a longer alternate.

⁴Brigham D. Madsen, *Gold Rush Sojourners in Great Salt Lake City, 1849 and 1850* (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 1983), 109-110, 132.

(This information has not been edited.)

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