

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

CALIFORNIA TRAVELERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CITY OF ROCKS

Number 842

August 1995

Emigrants who drove their wagons past City of Rocks on their way to California found a marvelous display of towers, cliffs, and other oddities that they went quite a distance out of their way to inspect those attractions. Their horses and oxen, in earlier years at least, had a welcome opportunity to indulge in a few hours of grazing while their drivers were off on a scenic side tour. As late as September 1865, Charles Nelson Teeter (who had come by there before) stopped with his party of freighters to tour and describe that point of interest:

It "is a city not built by hands, neither is it constructed out of wood or brick, but is made of a material more enduring than either: a material that neither time nor the elements can deface. It is the granite rock itself. It must have been produced by some peculiar freak of nature, but in which manner or at what particular period is unknown. It is, in fact, a city of rocks, and nothing else, as its name would indicate, and wholly destitute of inhabitants; surrounded by the plain, which gradually slopes away in every direction, if my memory serves me aright. They stand there like so many monuments, cone-shaped in form, raising their heads from ten to thirty feet above the surface. The space between the rocks is sufficiently wide to admit a horse and rider, so that one can ride in between and around among them. They remind one of a grave yard, so solemn the place appears, and as one rambles among these rocks it seems to him almost as if he were trespassing upon sacred ground. He looks for, and almost expects to see, at every turn he makes, inscriptions made by the sculptor's chisel, but he looks in vain--no trace of art can be seen, not a single fragment of these strange rocks has ever been subjected to the engraver's touch.

The city, if indeed city it can be called, is truly the work of nature--art has had nothing to do with it in any shape or manner. When we had all gratified our curiosity, we bid the place adieu and rode away.

J. Goldsborough Bruff took time off during his California gold rush expedition, August 29, 1849, to describe it in detail, and to sketch its outstanding features:

Early breakfast, & soon on the trail again,-which winds up this deep valley, from S. by E. round to N.W.- An entire range on our left, of volcanic hills, for about 15 miles: and on our right, similar formations for about 10 ms. when we entered a very extraordinary valley, called the "City of Castles." A couple of miles long, and probably $\frac{1}{2}$ mile broad, A light grey decipitating granite, (probably altered by fire) in blocks of every size, from that of a barrel to the dimensions of a large dwelling-house; groups, Masses on Masses, and Cliffs; and worn, by the action of ages of elementary affluences, into strange and romantic forms.-The travellers had marked several large blocks as their fancy dictated the resemblance to houses, castles, &c.-On one was marked (with tar) "NAPOLEON'S CASTLE," another "CITY HOTEL," &c. We nooned among these curious monuments of nature. I dined hastily, on bread & water, and while others rested, I explored and sketched some of these queer rocks. A group, on left of the trail, resembled gigantic fungii, petrified, other clusters were worn in cells and caverns; and one, which contrasted with the size and height of the adjacent rocks, seemed no larger than a big chest, was to my astonishment, when close to it, quite large, hollow, with an arch'd entrance, and capable of containing a dozen persons. This, from its peculiar shape, I named the "Sarcophagus Rock." While noosing, 2 Mormon young men, on horses, with Mexican equipment, came up; said they were trading for broken-down cattle, and had a camp and wagon not far off, in a small valley. They of course were from Salt Lake. I inquired if they had travelled, by this route, to California, to which they replied in the affirmative; and on desiring some information, one of them took out of his pocket a sort of Guide book, formed of a sheet of paper folded small, miserably written, and worse spelling, which he said was the last he had, & I might take it for 50¢, but that he had sold a number, to the emigrants for \$1 each. I purchased it more for a curiosity than any idea of its serving me en route. I have discovered no sign of my train having passed here, and conclude that they are ahead, yet must have passed through this valley. Left my card in the Sarcophagus Rock. After dinner a ride of 2 miles brought us to the outlet of this romantic vale, a very narrow pass-just wide enough for a wagon, and on either side very high,

jagged, and thin walls of granite, -with cedar bushes in the crevices. -This is called the "Pinnacle Pass," and the tall rock on right, -the "Spire rock." On leaving the Gate, we descended a steep hill, and in ½ mile reached where the Salt Lake road joins this, -the Oregon and California road.

Like many other California Trail travelers, Lucena Parsons went over from her campground for a tour there, April 22, 1850:

Last eve went to the City rocks. They are at the junction of the California & Salt Lake roads. They are white & about 300 ft high running up to a peak. They are composed of a substance resembling salts & are in a state of decomposition. A few more years & then will be leveled with the ground. They look at a distance like a ruined city.

Some of them, like Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, camped near an attraction in this case on July 19, 1849, but still went over to admire other features:

The road lies between high & immense rocky mountains, with not a particle of herbage or vegetation upon them, but being white & smooth upon their surface.

Just opposite to where we encamped was one which struck us as particularly curious. It was a perfect face upon the highest cliff around. . . .The road continued between these & around these rocky piles but the road itself was good. You can imagine among these massive piles, church domes, spires, pyramids, &c., & in fact, with a little fancying you can see (anything) from the Capitol at Washington to a lovely thatched cottage. Four miles brought us to the coming in of the Mormon Road. Half [a] mile before striking it we passed through a narrow pass of rock, just wide enough for the wagons, & which evidently has been made by some adventurers before us. Three miles farther we came to another valley.

Different emigrants had their own names for special features. Margaret A. Frink, July 17, 1850, preferred Pyramid City:

This morning we started early, at half past five o'clock, and nearly all day traveled over rough roads.

During the forenoon we passed through a stone village composed of huge, isolated rocks of various and singular shapes, some resembling cottages, others steeples and domes. It is called "City of Rocks," but

I think the name "Pyramid City" more suitable. It is a sublime, strange, and wonderful scene-one of nature's most interesting works. The Salt Lake road, which turned off between Dry Sandy and Little Sandy, and which we passed on the twenty-sixth day of June, rejoins our road at this point. The altitude of Pyramid City is five thousand nine hundred seventy-five feet, being the highest point between the top of the Bear River Range and where the emigrant road crosses the Sierra Nevada. Eight miles from Pyramid City we recrossed, going southwest, the forty-second parallel of latitude, which we had crossed going north, on the eighth day of June, near Fort Laramie.

Bryon N. McKinstry, August 3, 1850, had heard them referred to as Chapel Rocks:

There is a high snowy mountain in front and high hills on each side. Crossed the creek and left it on the right, and by an easy ascent reached a summit and as gradually descended to a valley of sage and sand sloping to the South East, the streams running toward the Salt Lake and either emptying into it or losing themselves in the plain. Considerable grass in strips where we nooned and we can see the Salt Lake road to the South East. In the afternoon we crossed two divides. Passed some high isolated granite hills or peaks, many of them rising from a level plain an hundred or more feet. They are in curious shapes resembling spires, towers, forts, &c. One on the road is well covered with names and surrounded with a grassy field. Springs issuing from near the foot. To the right these hills form a mountain range with high peaks of the same kind. The granite is much decomposed, the earth mostly composed of the debris and at the foot of the peaks quite coarse. I think that some call these Chapel Rocks. They are at the junction of the Salt Lake & Ft. Hall roads. Among the granatic gravel I notice specks of isin-glass which some among us imagine to be gold.

Cyrus C. Loveland, August 7, 1850, was more original:

Then went through a Novelty Pass, distance of three miles, to Echo Gap. This pass through the mountains is called Novelty Pass from the great mountains of singularly shaped rock on either side of the road. There is a very large rock on the left, close to the road, that I named Temple or Recorder's Rock. Here, upon its base, is recorded many an

emigrant's name. This rock may be one hundred and twenty feet high and runs up nearly perpendicularly. A little further and on the right is another with a small prong sticking up on its top that appears a little like a cupola. I might give names to many of these monuments of Nature but they are too numerous. Echo Gap is fifteen or twenty feet wide, with perpendicular rocks on each side from fifty to one hundred and fifty high, and receives its name from having the loudest echo that I have ever heard. One mile after leaving Echo Gap brings us to where the Salt Lake Road comes in.

Richard August Keen, June 22, 1852, liked Castle Rocks:

Camped at Steeple or Castle Rocks here is a sublime scenery to the Romantic the rocks resemble an old City of Ruins there are thousands of names here I registered Mine on a large Rock which we named the Castle Rock hotel.

By July 12, 1852, John Hudson Wyman saw that formation as Granite City:

. . . encamped in Granite City one of the finest natural places of its kind in the World, I banter the World to beat it This City is Walled in on every side with towering Granite mountains some peaks shooting athwart the sky like towering domes. While hundreds of piles, peaks, steeples & domes of all shapes possible in the distance looking like an old delapidated City. In a south Eastern direction may be seen a large mountain made up of Mica schist This after noon we passed through a most beautiful basin surrounded with fine Mountains. To this Granite City seems to be but two outlets, a narrow gorge where we entered, and a wider space where we made our exite Here I obtained several specimens one from the Mansion house as I call it, as a token of remembrance This City is situated near the half way place between Raft River and Goose Creek

Then John E. Dalton, July 26, 1852, accepted Pyramid Circle:

Started at 1/4 past 6 and in 4 miles came to Pyramid Circle & Steeple Rock - The Circle within the Rocks resembles the Crater of a Volcano, which it doubtless once has been - The Rocks all around the circle and some a little distance off and many scattered about within the circle, seem to stick up out of the ground like very picked Hay stacks, in all kinds

of shapes; from 10 to 200 feet high The circle is about 5 miles across one way & 3 the other; with only a narrow passage into it from the East 20 yds wide & another from the West 10 yds. Wide; the road passing through it - Within the Circle is one of the coldest springs seen on the route - and the Circle is surrounded on all sides with lofty mountains, covered with ever green Cedars; rendering the whole one of the most beautiful, grand, pictures & delightful scenes I ever behold.

Eliza Ann McAuley, August 9, 1852, concurred in Pyramid Circle. They got that identification from an emigrant guide book:

Traveled eight miles when we entered Pyramid Circle. This is one of the greatest curiosities on the road. In some places a pillar rises to a height of one hundred and fifty feet, with smaller ones piled on the top and sides, looking as though a breadth of air would hurl them down. These pyramids are of various colors.

The sides have been washed by the rains in all manner of fantastic shapes, giving the place a most romantic and picturesque appearance. The circle is five miles long and three miles wide, level within the wall around and entirely surrounded by these pyramids of cliffs except in an inlet at the east end of about fifty yards, and an outlet at the western end just wide enough to permit the wagons to pass through. The rocks are covered as far up as one can reach or climb, with names of emigrants. We left ours with date in a conspicuous place for the boys behind. We saw the names of some of our acquaintances who passed here two years ago.

Their guidebook followed a suggestion from Augustus Burbank, who described that area August 4, 1849:

Passed on through what I called pyramid pass. The Grey Granite Rocks stand in pyramid, mountain & dome forms, here & there towering aloft. The road winds along between them. Emigrants names are written with tar-keel & on these curious structures. Here was truly manifested in a temporal point, the figures used in the Scriptures like unto the Shadow of a great rock in a weary land. The shadow was cool-inviting and brought to mind the Spiritus 1 illustration-of the figure-the Scenery was grand & the concave rocks at the narrow pass was quite a curiosity. 4 miles on to the connection of the Salt Lake Road (the road named as

connecting yesterday was a branch of the same I presume). A number of Emigrants came by the way of the Lake.

By 1854, though, City of Rocks had yet another designation when William Woodham came by, June 22:

At noon we encamped near the so-called Monumental rocks. They are a cluster of rocks forming a sort of semi-circle. They rise to a great height and are of a light grey color and look like the ruins of some enormous structure. They are situated in an amphitheatre of mountains, with snow capped summits. The rocks themselves rise out of a little plain covered with velvet sod. A small stream issues from their base and glitters along down the valley. A sort of thin mist hangs in the air, giving a dreamy appearance to the whole scene. . . .All afternoon we travelled along the same valley among the rocks of the most singular shapes, some rising to great heights like the spires of churches, others of a more tower like appearance. Encamped on a sage plain near a little creek with tolerable grass.

But in 1859, they were Steeple Rocks again, James Berry Brown recognized that feature, August 21:

After a few miles we entered the mountains and in 9½ miles from last camp came to Steeple rocks, which are large while curiously shaped rocks scattered over a surface of several acres. Some of them run up to a point like the steeple of a church, many names are painted on their sides one mile from these rocks we came to where the Salt Lake road intersects and now all three roads are one again.

Thomas Cristy, July 1, 1850, had used that designation almost a decade earlier:

At 3 oclock this morning we wer all stiring & shortly after we had commenced this days travel. 3 miles from morning camp we crossed a low swampy, springy piece of ground. At the head of this is a warm spring near the foot of the mountain where it boils up clear as crystal. Half a mile farther there is a small spring and 3 miles from there the road turns up a ravine between two high mountains, passing through Castle City (or Steeple Rocks). These are a curiosity worth the travelers notice, having the appearance [of] decayed castels and lofty steeples, an ther are the

names of travelers painted in various colors. 2 miles from this is the junction of the Salt Lake road with the California and Oregon road. 2 miles from this is a small creek. 5 miles from this the road ascends a high mountain. The descent is about four miles long, and in some places very steep. At the foot of this is Birch Creek, and two miles from this brought us to Goose Creek, where we encamped, having traveled during the day 25 miles.

Before they embarked upon their long trip west, most emigrants had not seen geological features like City of Rocks. So they were more impressed than more experienced travelers would be. But City of Rocks still is an unusual attraction that has a great appeal almost a century after emigrant wagons began to give way to automobiles.

(This information has not been edited.)

Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428