

Exploring Unknown Territory

Lewis and Clark's comprehensive documentation of the West provided hundreds of thousands of colonists with information on what was once unknown and uncharted territory. Soon, many more explorers would make the exciting journey westward. In 1810, John Jacob Astor, looking for a place to set up a fur-trading enterprise, sent two groups to explore the West. The first group, traveling by ship, did not succeed in getting to the Pacific, but the group traveling over land did succeed, and more importantly, found a 20-mile wide gap in the Rocky Mountains—the one passage where wagons could get through. Named South Pass, this gap would become the place through which hundreds of thousands of pioneers would travel. But several decades passed before people decided to make the journey westward, in part due to rumors that the West was comprised of vast deserts.

Only certain adventurous explorers, known as "Mountain Men" explored these uncharted territories. In search of beaver pelts, which they used to trade for other goods, these men made important discoveries. One mountain man, John Colter, found the geysers at Yellowstone National Park. Another, Jim Bridger, discovered the Great Salt Lake. One of the most famous of the mountain men, Jedediah Smith, re-discovered the South Pass through the Rocky Mountains. Smith also created the "Fremont-Gibbs-Smith map," the only accurate and comprehensive map, covering terrain he explored from Canada to Mexico.

Despite the map, no explorer retraced Smith's path through the Southwest. Instead, a trail blazed by Joe Walker and Benjamin Bonneville became the route for thousands of pioneers, and the route for the transcontinental railroad decades later. This path was part of what would become the Oregon Trail.

Explorer John Fremont traveled west along the Oregon Trail in 1842 and 1843. The father of Fremont's wife, Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton, believed in "manifest destiny," the idea that the United States of America was destined to expand across the North American continent. Benton therefore ordered Fremont to send back positive reports about the West. Fremont's reports stirred up excitement and made the journey seem more feasible to people in the East.