

WHERE DID FREMONT CROSS THE TEHACHAPI MOUNTAINS IN 1844?

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Most of the authorities on the history of California assert, or imply, that the Lieutenant at this time traveled the pass now known as Tehachapi.¹ The uncertainty clouding this small detail in Dr. Cleland's account, intrigued the writer to attempt some research in this direction, with the wholly unexpected result that he is forced to conclude that the Pathfinder used none of the passes mentioned in the standard texts, but rather the one now known as the "Oak Creek Road." This is neither named nor otherwise referred to in any work that has come to his notice, but was an old and well-trodden trail as late as 1870. This paper deals with the reasons for arriving at this somewhat surprising conclusion.

Some idea of the geography of this region may be obtained from the accompanying map. The Tehachapi mountains form an east and west link at about the 35th parallel, between the southern end of the Sierra Nevadas on the east, and the Coast ranges on the west. They mark the southern limit (head) of the San Joaquin Valley, which is walled in on three sides by these three mountain groups. South and east lie the Mojave and Colorado deserts. Lieutenant Williamson, who, under orders from the War Department, examined these Tehachapi mountains in 1853 for the purpose of finding the most practical passage for a railway, discovered six more or less available passes through them, of varying degrees of difficulty.² Beginning with the most easterly, they were as follows:

1. Bancroft: Fremont and his party "were guided by Christian Indians through Tehachapi Pass, so far as I can determine from the map and narrative, and not through Walker's Pass at all." (*History of California*, Vol. IV, page 439.)

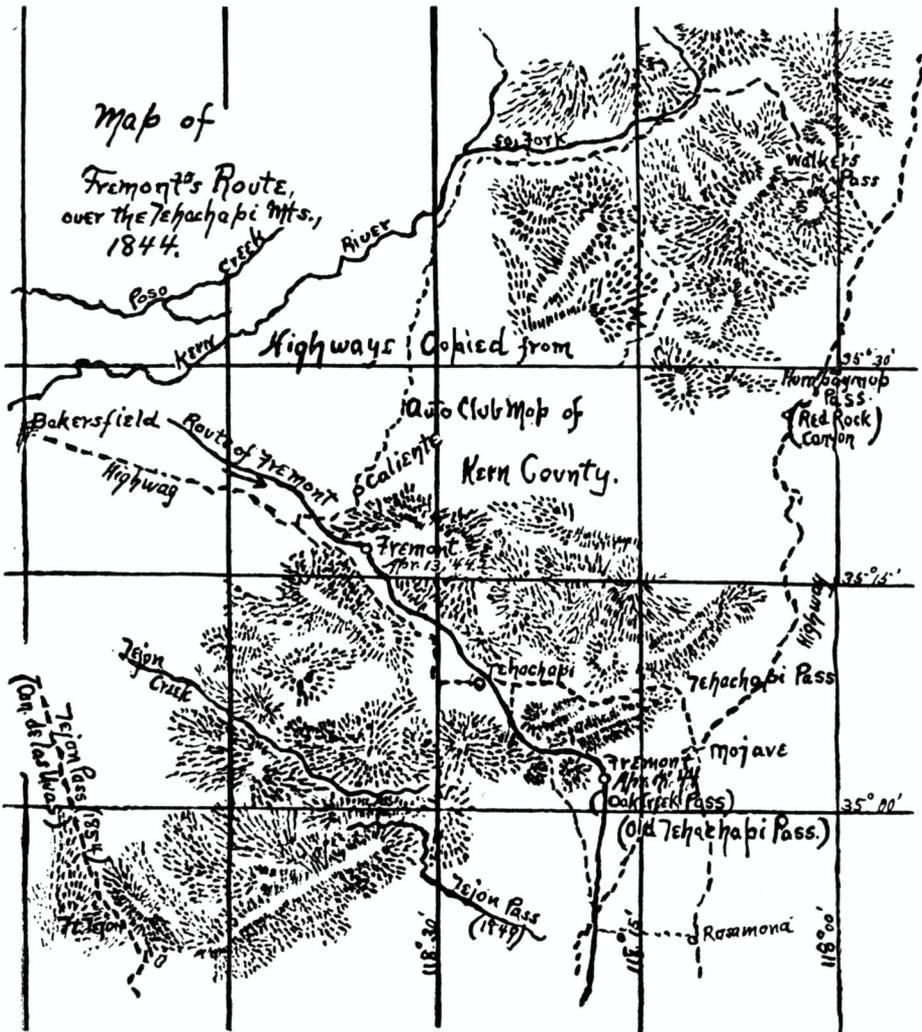
Eldredge: "The party explored the San Joaquin Valley to its southern limit,—passing out of it by the Tehachapi Pass, apparently, instead of Walker's Pass as was intended—and returned east to Salt Lake." (*History of California*, Vol. III, p. 5.)

Dellenbaugh: "The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and the Southern Pacific railways now utilize the Tehachapi Pass for the traverse from the San Joaquin Valley to the desert." (*Fremont and '49*, p. 246.)

Cleland: "The Americans fell in with a Christian Indian from the San Fernando Mission, who led them either through the Tejon or the Tehachapi Pass." (*History of California, American Period*, p. 137.)

2. Williamson, "Report of Explorations in California for Railroad Routes," in *Explorations and Surveys for a Railroad Route to the Pacific*, Vol. V, Pt. I, p. 16.

- Walker's Pass. (Near Freeman.)
- Tehachapi Pass. (Traversed by the railways.)
- Oak Creek Road. (Willow Springs north to Tehachapi.)
- Tejon Pass. (Original pass of that name, along Cottonwood and Tejon Creeks.)
- Canyon de las Uvas. (Present Tejon Pass.)
- San Emidio Pass. (San Emidio Creek to Cuddy Valley.)



A seventh, Humpayamup, is only a southern branch of Walker's, debouching into the desert through Red Rock (?) Canyon. Much confusion has arisen in published accounts, due to the fact that each of three of these names, Walker's, Tehachapi, and Tejon, has been applied to two different passes in succession.³

It is unnecessary and would be out of place to detail here the circumstances which brought Lieutenant Frémont and his party into California and to Sutter's fort in March, 1844. It is sufficient to say that after about two weeks' rest on the Sacramento, it seemed best to go south to the head of the San Joaquin Valley, cross the Tehachapi into the desert, and follow along its western border till they found the Old Spanish Trail at Cajon Pass.⁴ Proceeding over this route through Utah, they planned to return to the Missouri by way of Bent's Fort.

In accordance with this scheme, Frémont found himself, at the close of Saturday, April 13, at a point which, from his bearings, appears to have been a few miles southeast of the site of the present city of Caliente.⁵ A nearby stream he named "Pass Creek."⁶

That evening, they were very much surprised and pleased as well, to see a young Indian ride into the camp, well-dressed

3. This word "Tehachapi" is the Indian term meaning "windy." Those who have left the desert in the afternoon through almost any one of its western passes know altogether too well that it applies to these passes admirably. Lieutenant Williamson found it already allocated to the pass now used by the railways. Resident pioneers in the valley occasionally give the name to the Oak Creek road, but if historians have this latter trail in mind when they use the term, they give no hint of it.

4. Fremont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, Gales & Seaton, 1845, p. 248.*

5. The itinerary of this part of the journey reads as follows:

Date	Latitude	Longitude	Mileage
April 13	35 deg. 17 min.	118 deg. 35 min.	32
April 14	35 deg. 03 min.	118 deg. 18 min.	32
April 15	34 deg. 42 min.	118 deg. 20 min.	39

The camps at end of each day:

April 13.	Pass Creek. (Tehachapi Creek, near Caliente.)
April 14.	Small stream east of Sierras. (West of Mojave.)
April 15.	Rock Springs. (North by west of Del Sur.)

(*Report, H. R., Blair & Ives, 1845, p. 298.*)

Concerning Fremont's bearings, it should be said that authorities, including Fremont himself, agree that they are not always strictly accurate, especially the longitudes. When we consider the vicissitudes to which his instruments must have been subjected by the exigencies of his mode of travel, the wonder is not that inaccuracies are found, but rather that he was able to obtain any data at all under the circumstances. The actual camps of the 14th and 15th would seem to have been about three miles west of the sites indicated.

6. Authorities agree that "Pass Creek" is identical with the one now called "Tehachapi Creek." In 1853, Lieutenant Williamson, coming upon it near its sources, followed it some fifteen miles down to where it lost itself in the Tulare. (*Op. cit.* p. 19.) Dellenbaugh locates this camp on Cottonwood Creek, a small affluent of the Kern not far from Bakersfield. On the next page, he refers to Tehachapi Creek as though it were a branch of the Cottonwood. (*"Fremont and '49,"* p. 243.)

in Spanish costume, and able to speak the language fluently. Very friendly relations were established. He said that he belonged to the Mission at San Fernando, was on his way thither, and, if desired, would guide the party across the mountains and as far as San Francisquito Canyon, where his trail departed from theirs. Frémont was more than glad to accept his leadership. Moreover, with the boy, to appear later, were a number of his friends who came from "a great river in the eastern part of the desert," to trade. They were now returning, and the Lieutenant and his people could travel with them, which would seem to be a debatable pleasure along a well-marked trail like the Mormon path.

It is quite probable that the advent of this Indian caused a complete change in Frémont's plans, and that the following of the Indian's advice saved the company from fatal disaster in Death Valley. It will be recalled, in connection with this expedition of 1843, that an ulterior and well-nigh secret object was the exploration of the southern part of the Great Basin. With this idea in mind, Frémont left the Dalles in November. He pigeon-holed it when he arrived at Pyramid Lake. The condition of his animals' feet, and lack of materials to keep them shod, made the long southern trip impossible at this time.⁷ Accordingly, he was forced to find Sutter's Fort, reluctantly postponing the Basin work indefinitely.

As we have seen, he departed from the Fort intending to return to the Missouri by way of the Old Spanish Trail. But entering the foothills of the Tehachapis, the lure of the unknown basin seized him again. He decided to go directly eastward from the pass. Broaching this plan to the Indian boy, he was at once told of the unparalleled dangers of that region. "His representation, which described it as an arid and barren desert, that had repulsed, by its sterility, all attempts of the Indians to cross it, determined me to relinquish the plan."⁸

Breaking camp the next morning, and led by their new guide, the party proceeded up the creek. They had not gone far when they came to a fork in the stream. They followed the right-hand branch to its head waters, which would bring

7. Fremont, *Op. cit.*, p. 220.

8. Fremont, *Op. cit.*, p. 254.

them into the lower, western end of the Tehachapi Valley, not far from the site of the present city of Tehachapi. The Lieutenant doesn't mention the valley, but discourses at length on the beauties of the region. About mid-afternoon, apparently, they reached the summit of a pass, which Frémont named "Walker's Pass."⁹ That this is not the one now known by that name, which is nearly two degrees north of this one, is evident after a moment's consideration, as follows: We know that on that 14th of April they traveled 32 miles, and pitched camp on "a small stream east of the Sierras."¹⁰ It would have been hopelessly impossible to have moved that cavalcade, which usually strung out to a length of a quarter of a mile, between the terminal points of that day's journey by way of our Walker's Pass, covering only 32 miles in transit, especially as the trail through this latter pass was difficult, and not conducive to rapid traveling.¹¹ He doesn't give the bearings of his "Walker's Pass," but says that "its latitude and longitude may be considered that of our last encampment, only a few miles distant . . . our half-wild cavalcade making it too troublesome to halt before night, when once started."¹² This would seem to effectually dispose of the notion that, on this expedition, he went through the present Walker's Pass. But the fact that he referred to that pass at least twice in his report, rather calls for some consideration of it.

Several authorities are seemingly of the opinion that the Lieutenant made use of the present Tehachapi Pass at this time. We have noted Dr. Cleland's suggestion. Even Dellenbaugh, who seems to have traveled most of the route, if not the entire trail, of this expedition, brings him through Tehachapi, by implication at least.¹³ He mentions no other. One hesitates a long time before harboring doubts concerning statements of accepted authorities like these, and it is with much diffidence that the writer is offering a different opinion. But a summer's study of contemporaneous writers, including, of course, Frémont's own account, together with many hours spent in personal exploration of old and new trails in this

9. Fremont, *Op. cit.*, p. 248.

10. See Note 5.

11. Williamson, *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

12. Fremont, *Op. cit.*, p. 255.

13. See Note 1.

section, has convinced him that Lieutenant Frémont not only did not use this pass, but was unaware of its existence until several years later.¹⁴

On one of his trips to Tehachapi, the writer was fortunate enough to meet Mr. Robert F. Glenn, one of the earliest pioneers of this region. He had been recommended by responsible parties, and was found to be an interesting raconteur, with an apparently excellent memory. He entered the valley in 1868, over what is now called the "Oak Creek Road," from the vicinity of Willow Springs. There was then "nothing to be seen in the valley but red cattle." Except for four years, he has never lived elsewhere. This Oak Creek Road was the first across the mountains, and old when his party trod it. It was the routine trail of the natives.

The summit is but six miles from the city of Tehachapi, over an excellent dirt road, which leaves the highway near the railroad "Y," west of Monolith. The grades occur in the last two miles. Most cars will negotiate them in high gear. Three springs were noted by the roadside on the way, and others on the descent beyond, which explains the popularity of the pass. And this was in August. The high point is a broad, shallow depression between two low hill-tops, neither one high enough to obstruct the views. These are very extensive and full of variety, as interesting as any in this part of the state. A visitor is at once struck with the aptness of Frémont's description of "this beautiful pass," especially on driving through

14. Williamson thinks that Lieutenant Fremont never saw the Pass called Walker's until ten years after he made this crossing of 1844. In a letter by Fremont under date of June 13, 1854, we find this:

"Commencing at the 38th, we struck the Sierra Nevada at about the 37th parallel on the 15th of March. . . . I expected to find the Sierras here broad, rugged, and blocked up with snow, and was not disappointed in my expectations. . . . I accordingly turned southward some sixty or eighty miles, making a wide sweep to strike the point of the California mountain where the Sierra Nevada suddenly breaks off and declines into a low country. Information obtained from the Indians years before, led me to believe that the low mountains were broken into numerous passes, and at all events I had the certainty of an easy passage through the mountains by either of Walker's Passes. When the Point was reached, I found the Indian information fully verified; the mountain suddenly terminated and broke down into lower ground, barely above the level of the country, and making many openings into the valley of the San Joaquin. I entered the first which offered (taking no time to search, as we were entirely out of provisions and living upon horses), which led us to an open and almost level hollow thirteen miles long, to an upland not steep enough to be called a hill, over into the valley of a small affluent of the Kern River; the hollow and the valley making a way where a wagon would find no obstruction for forty miles." (*House Miscellaneous Documents*, 33d Congress, 2d Session, Doc. 8.)

Rather a roseate description of Walker's Pass. Forty miles brings him only to Isabella—the worst section lies between that point and the plains below. This pass did not achieve its name until the winter of 1845-46, when the failure of Fremont and Walker to meet at the "River of the Lake," advertised it so thoroughly that Walker's cognomen was affixed to it for all time.

it. We were standing where he probably passed,—we have his word for it that he was unable to loiter here for observations—at the head of a beautiful miniature valley extending eastward for a few miles to low foothills in which it lost itself just before debouching into the desert beyond. At our feet began a long, gentle slope down to Oak Creek, whose sinuous course through its meadows was marked by a dark green ribbon of oaks, which dotted the valley floor. On either side, rising in a wide, graceful sweep, were the “low Sierras,” mentioned by Frémont, their summits across from us forming an undulating line. To the right, the higher mountains led the way toward the Coast ranges at the Canyon de las Uvas, our Tejon Pass. Behind and to the left a similar mass of peaks pointed the way to Mt. Whitney and the higher Sierras. This for the foreground. South and east, beyond the low hills across the creek, lay the desert half-veiled in the August haze. We saw the “bald rocks” standing like shrouded ghosts of massive hills that had been. Still farther away, the “Lost Mountains,” dimly outlined where sky and desert dissolved in each other. What might this scene have been on that Sunday afternoon in April, when it broke suddenly upon Frémont’s gaze as he came over the crest!¹⁵

The party seems to have been led down from the summit to the creek, “passing by some springs, where there was a rich sward of grass among groves of large black oak,” and “rode over a plain” along the creek. Leaving the creek where a shallow gap appears southward, they seem to have thereby

15. It is interesting to compare the two descriptions, Williamson’s and Frémont’s, of what most authorities seem to consider the same pass. The former says:

“A small lake bed covered with incrustations of salt, lies at the entrance . . . and two miles farther [east] we found springs of fresh water. There was a continuous bed of a stream, now dry [in August], continuing into the basin [Mojave Desert], and the bases of the hills on either side were one-fourth mile apart. The descent, for the first six miles from the prairie [Tehachapi Valley], was less than eighty feet to the mile, and farther down it was even more gradual.” (Op. cit., p. 19.)

Anyone who has driven through the Tehachapi Pass from Monolith will agree that it would be difficult to put a more accurate description of it into the same number of words. Now listen to Frémont:

“As we reached the summit of this beautiful pass, and obtained a view into the eastern country, we saw at once that here was the place to take leave of all such pleasant scenes as those around us. The distant mountains were now bald rocks again; below, the land was any color but green.” *Report*, p. 255.)

So far as it goes, this is an equally accurate description of the pass he traveled, but it certainly cannot, by the most liberal construction, be made to apply to the Tehachapi Pass. The summit of this latter pass is at the railroad “Y,” Williamson’s viewpoint. Frémont mentions the “black oaks.” If there are any in Tehachapi Pass, they have escaped the writer’s notice.

made a short cut to a second stream, where they pitched the camp for that night, in sight of the desert. The distance between two points, one of which is in Tehachapi Valley, the other in the desert, is fifteen miles shorter than that between the same points by way of Tehachapi Pass.¹⁶ Thus it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to have made this day's march through the latter pass and covered but 32 miles.

But a more cogent reason for the belief that Frémont came over Oak Creek Pass, more convincing than any mentioned thus far, lies in the fact that Mr. Charles Preuss, who was with the Lieutenant on this expedition as chief assistant in the topographical work, also accompanied Lieutenant Williamson nine years later, when he was examining these passes for railroad purposes. Preuss pointed out this Oak Creek Pass to Williamson as the one used by Frémont when he and Preuss crossed these mountains in 1844. Let Williamson tell the story himself. He and Preuss had just finished the work in Tehachapi Pass.

"We next proceeded to examine the place where Col. Frémont passed, and which was pointed out to me by Mr. Preuss, who was with him at the time, and later plotted his notes. This point . . . was in a much straighter line to the Mojave river than the outlet of the prairie we discovered. In crossing, we had to ascend 600 feet in less than two miles. This point would be preferable for a wagon road, being much more direct, and the ground, in wet weather, more solid than in the outlet."¹⁷

This "outlet" is the present Tehachapi Pass. The "prairie" is the valley at the head of the pass. He goes on to say that, for railroad purposes a tunnel would be required in this pass, and that the longer route through the Tehachapi would be less expensive. This would seem to remove the last doubt as to which one Lieutenant Frémont traveled on this expedition.

It might be well to add that both Tejon Passes are out of the question. They are too far from the terminals of this day's journey. The more important, and probably the older

16. Williamson, *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

17. *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

of the two, was part of a trail which, coming up San Francisco Canyon, passed to Elizabeth Lake. Turning north at the western end of this sheet of water, it crossed Antelope Valley northwestward till it reached Cottonwood Creek. Following this to near its source, it turned directly north through a canyon, the original Tejon Pass, and soon struck the headwaters of Tejon Creek, which it followed into the San Joaquin Valley. About 1849, this road was made passable for wheels, though in 1853, Colonel Williamson stigmatized it as "the worst road he ever had seen," and doubtless he had had much experience. After his examination of the Canyon de las Uvas, fifteen miles farther west, he was so much impressed with its availability for transit purposes, that he immediately set men at work transforming it into a wagon road. The following year, the War Department erected a military post thereon (Fort Tejon). Since then it has been one of the two main highways between southern points and the San Joaquin Valley.