

University of Northern Colorado

Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC

Bent's Old Fort

Colorado National Parks

Central Route to the Pacific

New York Daily Times

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/beol>

Central Route to the Pacific.

MESSRS GALE & SEATON—Gentlemen: I send you a letter just received from Fort Massachusetts, in the Valley of San Luis, head of the Rio Grande del Norte, which came to me as unexpectedly as if it had fallen from the clouds, and could not have been more acceptable if it had been from any other spot on the globe. It is written by a Virginia emigrant to California—one who had been there before, and now making one of a party of emigrants, all removing, and taking with them large herds of sheep and some cattle for the California market. They traveled upon the line which BEALE and HEAP described, and confirm all they said by the actual fact of the easy traveling of their wagons, and the condition of their sheep and cattle, "about as fat as any in the Philadelphia or Baltimore market;" and that after traveling upwards of one thousand miles from Illinois, and seven hundred of it from the Missouri frontier. The country is rich and beautiful, and the Valley of San Luis, and the mountain grass, all that LEROUX and FREMONT described it to be. Only think of that grass—thick as a meadow to the top of the mountains, and many acres good for four mowed tons—and plenty all Winter to sustain stock without food or shelter. The letter is exactly such a one as I would wish to get—a plain statement of what was actually seen by an emigrating company, moving in a body, without any system or theory to establish, and looking for the best way to get to California.

The pass which they mention, through which Captain GUNNISON went, is one of five in the Sierra Blanca leading from the Arkansas plains into the Valley of San Luis—three of which are excellent, and one of them higher up, and from seventy to eighty miles nearer than the other two, by being more in the straight line to the *Co-chatope* in the Rocky Mountains, or the *Canero* which is near it, and nearly as good. Instead of no passes in these mountains, there are a multiplicity of them—so many and so good that the traveler has choice in the variety, and is only puzzled to decide which is best.

Fort Massachusetts, where this letter is dated, is just at the spot where FREMONT was turned out of the valley by his guide in the Winter of 1848 and 1849, and when he found the pass almost without snow through which the *Utahs* passed from the Del Norte to the Arkansas, and which was so level that he could only by careful observation detect the point of the dividing waters.

In brief, Messrs. Editors, I now feel emboldened to repeat what Fremont has often told me, that in the central part of the Rocky Mountains, (covering the Three Parks, the headwaters of the South Platte, the Arkansas and the Del Norte, and the headwaters of the East Fork of the Great Colorado of the West,) exactly in the line from St. Louis to San Francisco, and about half way between them there is good country enough to make a mountain State double the size of all the Swiss cantons put together, and presenting every thing grand and beautiful to be found in Switzerland, without the drawbacks of glaciers and avalanches, and consequently without its cold. He has gone to verify his Winter theories in that region.

Respectfully, gentlemen, your obliged fellow-citizen,

THOMAS H. BENTON.

FORT MASSACHUSETTS, (N. Mex.) Aug. 28, 1853.

DEAR SIR: Knowing that you feel interested in the middle route for the great Pacific Railroad, and believing that any information with regard to it would be acceptable, no matter how humble the source from which it comes, I have determined to state what I know about it. This information is from traveling the route just behind Capt. GUNNISON. I left Virginia the 1st of April, went to Missouri and Illinois to purchase sheep for the California market. After purchasing, I started to take them by old Salt Lake, the Humboldt River, &c., feeling assured that I would have to winter at Salt Lake. I had gotten the sheep as far as St. Joseph's, Mo. Having some business in St. Louis, I met with Capt. GUNNISON, and learned from him that there was a better route by way of Utah Lake, and that he was going to open it, and that from what he knew about it it would be much better for me to take it. After thinking a good deal over it, I determined to take it, as there was a very large number of stock on the old route, and a good prospect of getting to California this season. I read your address with a great deal of interest; and feeling assured these statements about the route could be relied on, I left Missouri at Westport, on the 16th of June, with a large number of sheep and some cows—Mr CROCKETT, of Virginia, a partner with me. At Westport, I met with the two Mr. Ross', of Iowa, with their families going the old route; they also determined to accompany me the new route. After traveling a few days I fell in with the two Mr. BURWELL's, of Franklin City, Va., with a large number of cattle, who also were persuaded to join me. We traveled the Santa Fé road twenty-five miles above Fort Atkinson, keeping on the well-beaten track to thirty miles above BENT'S Old Fort, and crossed the Arkansas River at the mouth of Opishka Creek, crossed over to the Huerfano, up that stream about twenty miles, and crossed the Sierra Blanca mountains through Capt. GUNNISON'S Pass, about twelve miles south of LEROUX'S Pass, to this Fort. The distance given by Capt. GUNNISON is 693 miles from Westport, Mo.

I have traveled over the mountains of Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee, over several of the passes of the Sierra Nevada in California, and I have never seen a better or more easier pass for carriages and wagons than the one found by Capt. GUNNISON through the Sierra Blanca, just opposite Fort Massachusetts, and distant from it fifteen miles. I traveled the old route to California in 1849, and can speak of the two routes from actual experience, having gone over both with wagons. I look upon this route as far superior, and feel confident that as soon as it is known will and must be the great thoroughfare from the Atlantic to the Pacific. On this route there is an abundance of grass and water, so much that stock will travel and keep fat; the large majority of our sheep are as fat as any mutton in the Philadelphia or Baltimore market, and a very large number of Mr. BURWELL'S cattle are fine beef; and I have never seen any stock, after having traveled so far, look half as well. Both of the Mr. Ross's have carriages, and as yet nothing has in the least given way. I can say without fear of contradiction that this is one of the finest natural roads in the world, combining everything necessary to sustain stock, and I am confident that if its advantages are fully made known to Congress, that it will be adopted for the great Pacific Railroad. On this line almost the entire route can be settled, as all the land from Missouri to Bent's Fort is rich and very fertile, equal to the best lands of Missouri and Illinois, and no land can beat the Sierra Blanca for grass; even to the very summit it stands as thick as the best meadows; many acres would mow at least four tons per acre. Then comes the large and beautiful Valley St. Louis, said to be one of the most fertile in New Mexico; indeed fine land is upon the whole route, and the climate such that stock can live all winter upon the grass. I will here state the route I think best for emigrants to travel: leave Westport, Missouri, take the road to Uniontown, then to Fort Centro, then take Captain GUNNISON'S trail, which leads from the Kansas to the Arkansas, near the mouth of Walnut Creek, up the Arkansas above Bent's Old Fort, thirty-two miles; then up the Huerfano, through Capt. GUNNISON'S Pass, to Fort Massachusetts; then to Little Salt Lake, Walker's Pass, Sierra Nevada; then down the valley of the San Joaquin to Stockton or San Francisco. There are settlements at different points all along this route, where emigrants can get supplies, none further apart than two hundred miles. After leaving Missouri you pass first Council Grove, next the Fort on Walnut Creek, next Green Horn, next Fort Massachusetts, Little Salt Lake Santa Clara, *Nogas de Casatara*; at each of these supplies can be had. I feel confident when Capt. GUNNISON makes out his report that this route will be adopted. The pass through the Sierra Blanca is so low and gradual that a railroad can be made over it, and the grade will not exceed fifty feet to the mile. Capt. Gunnison is doing his whole duty, and well deserves the thanks of the whole country for the very well laid out road through this almost unexplored country. I will write you again after getting through to California, and describe the rest of the way. Yours, respectfully,

CHAS. W. McCLANAHAN.