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THE MISSING FREMONT CANYON

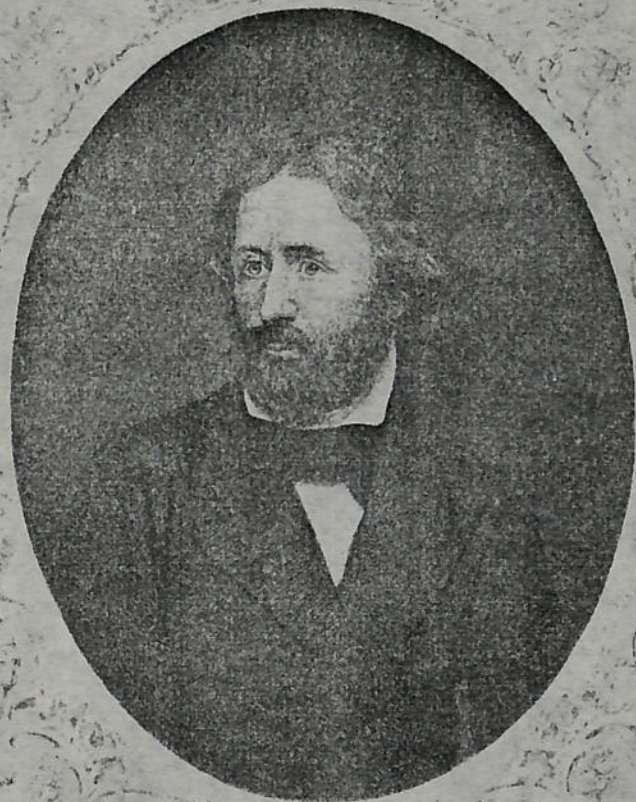
THE MISSING FRÉMONT CANNON—AN
ECOLOGICAL SOLUTION?

JACK L. REVEAL AND JAMES L. REVEAL

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*Jim Reveal has all m.m. material
mat. 10 to 700.*

Reveal



JOHN C. FRÉMONT
From a steel engraving made in 1856
at the time of his presidential campaign.
From the author's collection.

The Frémont Cannon

High Up and Far Back

Unravelling the puzzle of the
brass cannon abandoned in 1844
and never recovered from
California's Sierra Nevada

by
ERNEST ALLEN LEWIS

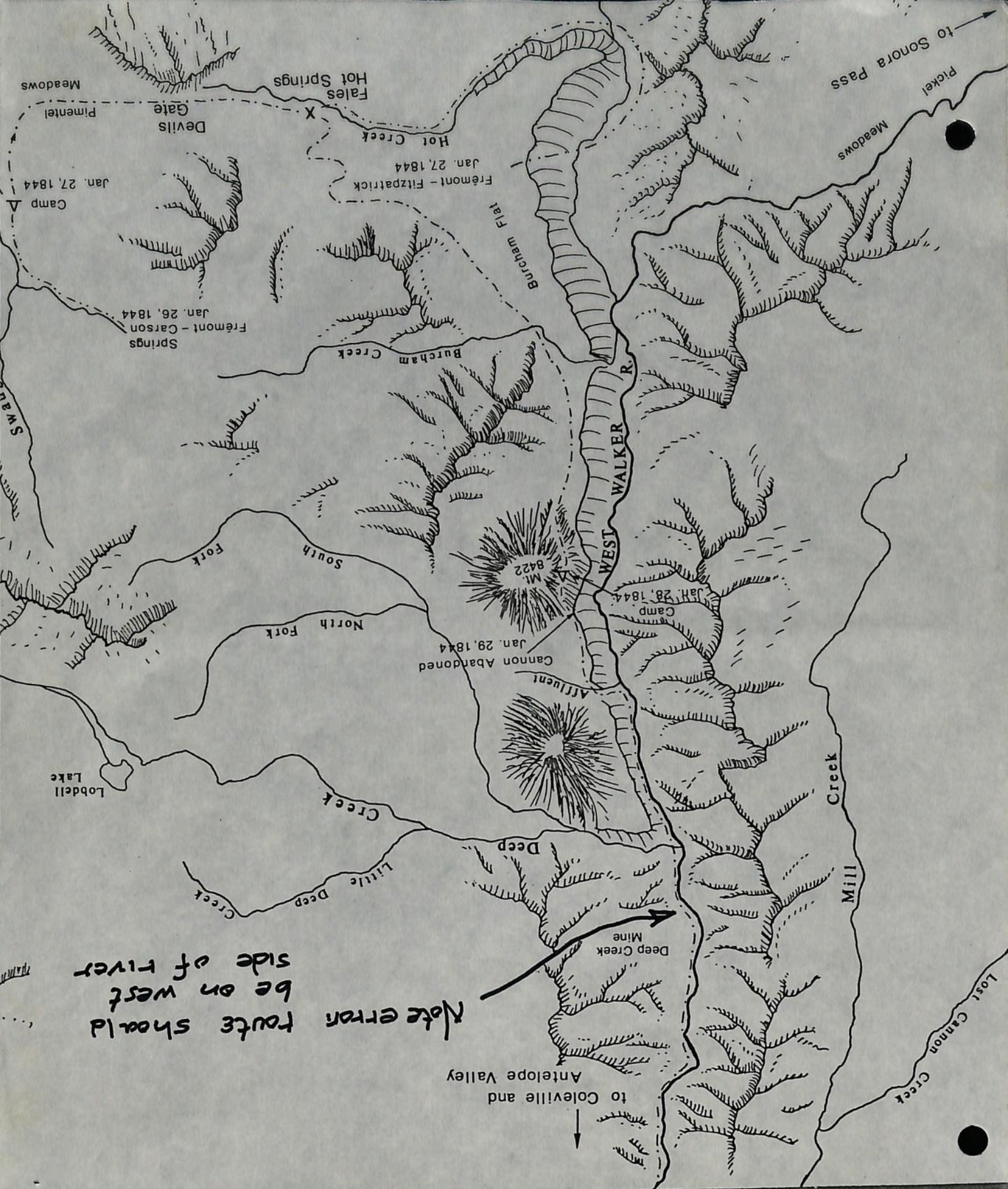


THE ARTHUR H. CLARK COMPANY
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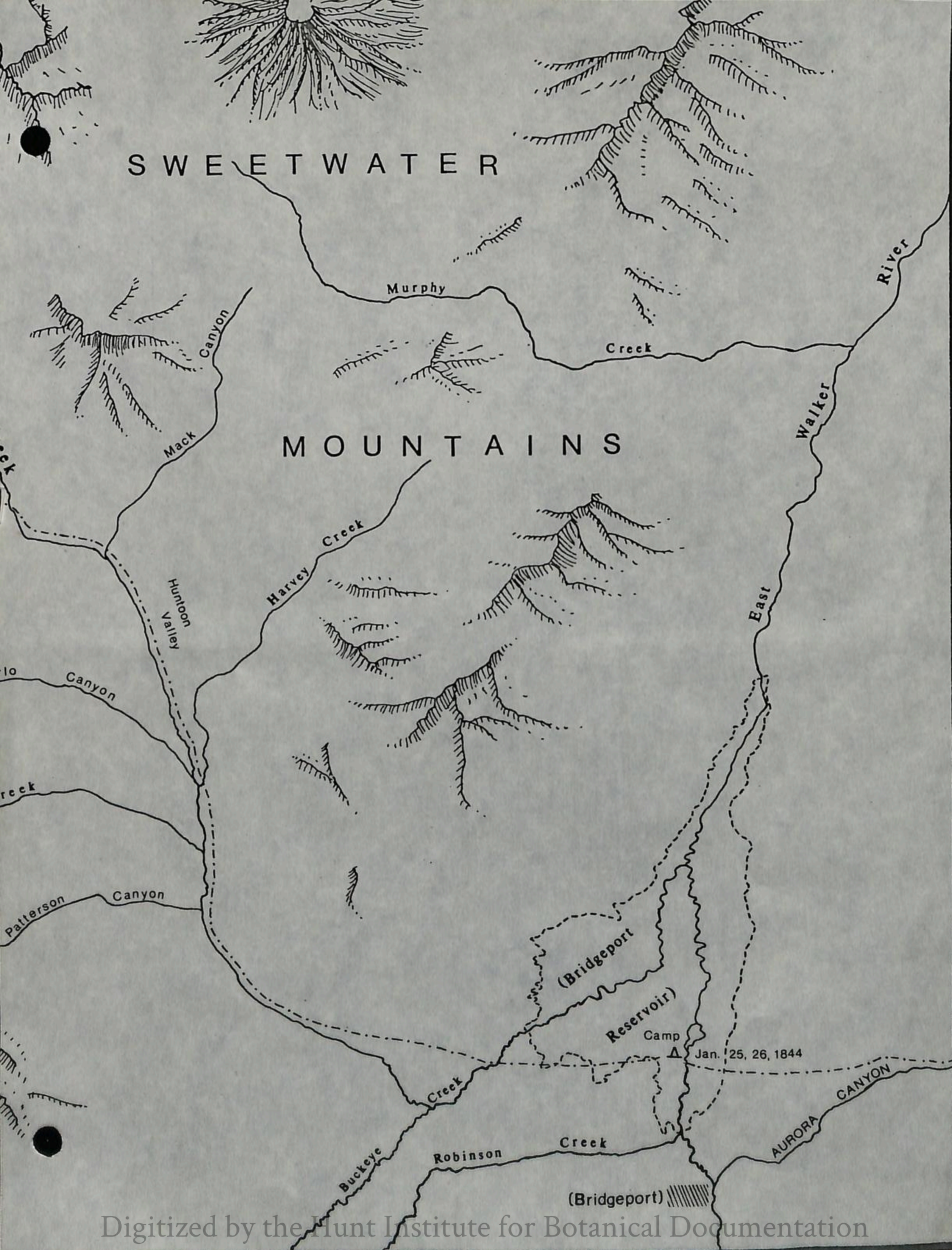
X = mistaken beliefs, errors, etc.

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Note error
 route should
 be on west
 side of river



SWEETWATER

MOUNTAINS

The Cannon is Abandoned

FRÉMONT accurately described the important landmarks along his route of January 26-29, 1844. The expedition had camped on the East Walker River about one mile north of Bridgeport, California, the nights of January 25 and 26. While the party rested on the 26th, Frémont and Carson explored ahead to the Swauger Creek campsite of January 27. Frémont wrote:

Entering the range, we continued in a northwesterly direction up the valley, which here bent to the right [Huntoon Valley]. From the fresh trails which occurred frequently during the morning, deer appeared to be remarkably numerous on the mountain. We had now entirely left the desert country, and were on the verge of a region which, extending westward to the shores of the Pacific, abounds in large game, and is covered with a singular luxuriance of vegetable life. The little stream grew rapidly smaller, and in about twelve miles we had reached its head, the last water coming immediately out of the mountain on the right, and this spot was selected for our next encampment [Swauger Creek].¹ To the left, the open valley [Pimentel Meadow] continued in a southwesterly direction, with a scarcely perceptible ascent, forming a beautiful pass; the exploration of which we deferred until the next day, and returned to the camp.

On January 27, Frémont and Thomas Fitzpatrick rode ahead of the main body. This day, Frémont's nar-

¹ Frémont probably does not intend to indicate this campsite was at the spring on the side of this steep mountain. He did want to camp in the narrow little valley where the party was protected from cold winds and where there was plenty of grass for the animals. The actual campsite was probably no more than one or two miles up the canyon from U.S. 395.

native would forever confuse the exact route of travel. Preuss' map provides the path of the actual route taken and is one of the keys to unlocking the mystery of where the cannon was abandoned. Frémont wrote:

January 27. Leaving the camp to follow slowly, with directions to Carson to encamp at the place agreed on, Mr. Fitzpatrick and myself continued the reconnoissance. Arriving at the head of the stream, we began to enter the pass – passing occasionally through open groves of large pine trees, on the warm side of the defile, where the snow had melted away, occasionally exposing a large Indian trail. Continuing along a narrow meadow, we reached in a few miles the gate of the pass, where there was a narrow strip of prairie, about fifty yards wide, between walls of granite rock [Devil's Gate]. On either side rose the mountains forming on the left a rugged mass, or nucleus, wholly covered with deep snow, presenting a glittering and icy surface. This was the icy and cold side of the pass, and the rays of the sun hardly touched the snow. On the left, the mountains rose into peaks; but they were lower and secondary, and the country had a somewhat more open and lighter character. On the right were several hot springs, which appeared remarkable in such a place [Fales Hot Springs]. In going through, we felt impressed by the majesty of the mountain, along the huge wall of which we were riding. Here there was no snow; but immediately beyond was a deep bank, through which we dragged our horses with considerable effort. We then immediately struck upon a stream, which gathered itself rapidly, and descended quick; and the valley did not preserve the open character of the other side, appearing below to form a cañon. We therefore climbed one of the peaks on the right, leaving our horses below; but we were so much shut up, that we did not obtain an extensive view, and what we saw was not very satisfactory and awakened considerable doubt.² The valley of the stream pursued a northwesterly direction, appearing below

² They climbed the steep escarpment up to Burcham Flat. If they had more time, they could have gone a little further and had a much better view of the West Walker River Canyon.

to turn sharply to the right, beyond which further view was cut off. It was, nevertheless, resolved to continue our road the next day down this valley, which we trusted still would prove that of the middle stream between the two great rivers.³

January 28. To-day we went through the pass with all the camp, and after a hard day's journey of twelve miles, encamped on a high point where the snow had been blown off, and the exposed grass afforded a scanty pasture for the animals. Snow and broken country together made our travelling difficult; we were often compelled to make large circuits, and ascend the highest and most exposed ridges, in order to avoid snow, which in other places was banked up to a great depth.

After passing through Devil's Gate, Frémont's party took the only logical route to the north – across Burcham Flat. The un-named mountain confronting them, which we will hereafter designate Mt. 8422, was a formidable obstacle. But, it was a much easier route than the steep ridge route over to Mill Valley or Lost Cannon Canyon. The many steep, snow-filled ravines between Sonora Junction and Mill Valley would have been nearly impossible obstacles to overcome.

That night they did not succeed in getting the howitzer into camp. The howitzer was left about halfway up the south face of Mt. 8422, and less than a mile from their camp in the saddle near the top of the mountain. "This was the most laborious day we had yet passed

³ This single sentence has been the cause of considerable controversy among historians tracing Frémont's route. Those who believe he did continue down the canyon and go over into Mill Valley use it as authentication. Those who believe this was not the route dismiss the sentence as a thought Frémont put in his notes on the 27th and somehow forgot to remove from the finished narrative. He almost certainly did not take this route. They did not continue down the valley, as Preuss' map clearly shows. To have continued down the Little Walker, cross the West Walker, go up and over the high ridge to Lost Cannon Canyon or into Mill Valley would have been nearly impossible.

through, the steep ascents and deep snow exhausting both men and animals," Frémont said.

January 29. From this height we could see, at a considerable distance below, yellow spots in the valley, which indicated that there was not much snow.⁴ One of these places we expected to reach tonight; and some time being required to bring up the gun, I went ahead with Mr. Fitzpatrick and a few men, leaving the camp to follow, in charge of Mr. Preuss. We followed a trail down a hollow where the Indians had descended, the snow being so deep that we never came near the ground; but this only made our descent the easier, and, when we reached a little affluent to the river at the bottom, we suddenly found ourselves in presence of eight or ten Indians.⁵ The Indians seemed to be watching our motions, and at first they were indisposed to let us approach, ranging themselves like birds on a fallen log on the hillside above our heads, where, being out of reach, they thought themselves safe. Our friendly demeanor reconciled them, and, when we got near enough, they immediately stretched out to us handfuls of pine nuts, which seemed an exercise of hospitality. We made them a few presents, and, telling us that their village was a few miles below, they went on to let their people know what we were. The principal stream still running through an impracticable cañon, we ascended a very steep hill, which proved afterwards the last and fatal obstacle to our little howitzer, which was finally abandoned at this place. We passed through a small meadow a few miles below, crossing the river, which depth, swift current, and rock, made it difficult to ford; and, after a few more miles of very difficult trail, issued into a larger prairie bottom, at the farther end of which we encamped, in a position rendered strong by rocks and trees.⁶

⁴ Frémont was viewing Antelope Valley from an area on the west face of Mt. 8422, and near the peak. It is the only location in the area where he would have this particular view.

⁵ This "little affluent to the river" is not Deep Creek. Deep Creek is approximately one mile further north over another high ridge and down a steep and treacherous canyon. Frémont's trail down a gradual decline crosses a "little affluent," which is very difficult to see until you are in it. This twenty foot wide and ten foot deep little affluent is spring-fed about 300 yards above where Frémont used it to follow the trail down to the river.



THE SITE OF FRÉMONT'S CAMP AT BRIDGEPORT
Viewing the Sierra Nevada to the West.
The town of Bridgeport in the foreground. Frémont's actual
camp is now under the waters of Bridgeport Reservoir.



DEVIL'S GATE
Looking west through the pass leading to the
West Walker River and the approach to Mountain 8422.



BURCHAM FLAT
Looking north across the flat toward Mountain 8422.



THE SADDLE OF MOUNTAIN 8422
Frémont camped here on January 28, 1844.
The cannon was abandoned here or near here the next day.



THE SOUTH FACE OF MOUNTAIN 8422
The trail north up the mountain appears deceptively gradual -
with no hint of the difficulties to come.



THE NORTH FACE OF MOUNTAIN 8422
A steep drop-off to the left leads down to the West Walker River.
In the far distance is the Antelope Valley
and the present-day town of Coleville.

The Indians brought in during the evening an abundant supply of pine nuts, which we traded from them. When roasted, their pleasant flavor made them an agreeable addition to our now scanty store of provisions, which were reduced to a very low ebb. Our principal stock was in peas, which it is not necessary to say contain scarcely any nutriment. We had still a little flour left, some coffee, and a quantity of sugar, which I reserved as a defence against starvation. The Indians informed us that at certain seasons they have fish in their waters, which we supposed to be salmon trout; for the remainder of the year they live upon the pine nuts, which form their great winter subsistence — a portion being always at hand, shut up in the natural storehouse of the cones. At present, they were presented to us as a whole people living upon this simple vegetable.⁷

The other division of the party did not come in to-night, but encamped in the upper meadow, and arrived the next morning. They had not succeeded in getting the howitzer beyond the place mentioned, and where it had been left by Mr. Preuss in obedience to my orders; and, in anticipation of the snow banks and snow fields still ahead, foreseeing the inevitable detention to which it would subject us, I reluctantly determined to leave it there for the time. It was of the kind invented by the French for the mountain part of their war in Algiers; and the distance it had come with us proved how well it was adapted to its purpose. We left it, to the great sorrow of the whole party, who were grieved to part with a companion which had made the whole distance from St. Louis, and commanded respect for us on some critical occasions, and which might be needed for the same purpose again.⁸

⁶ This is the West Walker River and Canyon south of Coleville, California. This canyon, river, and valley description fits no other within ninety miles in any direction.

⁷ This diet may explain why they were such a small and primitive race. It is interesting to note that Preuss made no comment on being in charge of the cannon when it was abandoned. Because of his feelings toward the howitzer, it could be expected that he would have devoted considerable diary space to such an event. Not only did he not do so, he only mentions it casually eleven days later on February 8: "We had to abandon the cannon a few days ago."



CHARLES PREUSS' MAP OF THE ROUTE

A portion showing the section of the route near the Bridgeport area. Preuss' map clearly shows the route following the West Walker River to Coleville. Place names have been added for orientation.

From Fremont's *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 1845.

John C. Frémont wrote this part of the narrative many months later. Upon his return to Washington, D.C., his wife, Jessie, and her father, Senator Benton, had told him of the concern he had caused with the requisition of the cannon. Acutely aware of the necessity of justifying his taking the cannon, its subsequent uses, and its final abandonment would and did require political and literary expertise. Although he was riding a crest of public popularity, the U.S. Army would insist on an explanation of the loss of a valuable piece of ordnance and nearly 500 pounds of powder and ammunition. This was not as difficult as it may appear, but it would have to be handled delicately and with finesse, and as accurately or nearly as accurately as possible. On one occasion he credited the cannon with preventing an Indian attack; this was politically sufficient in justifying its presence. A very steep hill rising from a deep canyon in an unknown region is also an appropriately rugged locale to abandon it. To further insulate his position, Frémont disassociated himself from the cannon. This is abnormal because from the beginning, he had insisted that the cannon spend each night in front of his teepee. Indeed, whenever the expedition was separated into two contingents he always took the cannon with his group. When it was abandoned on the 29th, he had not seen it since the camp on Swauger Creek or somewhere on Burcham Flat during the tortuous trek up Mt. 8422. All references to the cannon are spaced almost a page apart in the narrative; it is under the charge of another member of the party; it is always behind him; it is finally abandoned at his direction in a location impossible to traverse and when he is at least seven miles in front of its final resting

place. It is also intriguing to note that he selected January 28 as the date to explain that his last chronometer was defective, and thus implying no longitudes would be recorded from that day on. Actually, the chronometer was probably broken in mid-December, because no longitudes were recorded between December 14 and February 14. And he later commented that the two recorded February longitudes were only estimates. He resumed recording longitudes March 25, after leaving Sacramento.

All these points may or may not be relevant, but they are politically and bureaucratically expedient. They are not logical. It should be reaffirmed that a near truth about the unknown is as effective as the absolute truth. Any subsequent accusations or insinuations of discrepancy are easily explained as slight miscalculations or minor irregularities, and if a subordinate is temporarily in charge, the responsibility can be blamed on him.

Of particular interest is that on its final day and perhaps for the only time, Frémont said that the cannon was left in charge of the man who hated it the most, Charles Preuss. This had to be intentional. Because of his many critical comments in his diary, Preuss' feelings of hate for the cannon could not have been hidden from Frémont for so many months. It may have been a gesture of some sort from Frémont to the morose and unhappy Preuss. Whatever Frémont's reasons, they were unusual.

A series of subsequent incidents would further cause some historians to misinterpret Frémont's route from Fales Hot Springs to Antelope Valley. Because of a

few newspaper articles written between 1859 and 1864, plus unverified stories from the early settlers of Antelope and Mill valleys, the weapon was thought to have been found by a man named Sheldon. The general belief was that he had found it among a group of abandoned emigrant wagons near Mill Valley in July 1861.

Mill Valley is a serene and beautiful valley that parallels the West Walker River Canyon to the west. The valley is separated from the canyon and river by a high, steep jagged sawtooth mountain. In the 1880s a government geographical party came in to survey the area. Early settlers who had come to Antelope Valley in 1859 may have told them the local legend of the cannon's discovery, which probably caused the survey party to name Lost Cannon Peak and Lost Cannon Creek. They also surmised that since Frémont had commented on his intention to continue down the valley from Fales Hot Springs, he had done so. While drawing their maps, they commented that his route was down Hot Springs Creek to the Little Walker River and up and over the steep barrier ridge to Mill Valley and then down to Antelope Valley. This was forty years after the cannon was abandoned and it all seemed simple - Sheldon had taken the "Frémont Cannon" to Virginia City, Nevada, sold it, and supposedly it had been prominently displayed there. The mapped route seemed logical, caused no concern, and for all intents and purposes, no questions were raised for another thirty years. Frémont's biographers, interested in the total man and the seventy-seven years of his fascinating and very full life, found these few days and the loss of the cannon to be only a minor incident and consequence. This is understandable, and in this adventurous

life a true and accurate determination. The public's acceptance of the Sheldon cannon as Frémont's, the non-interest in the mistaken route of Frémont's trail, and the passage of nearly a century were the fortunate series of events that preserved this historical artifact in its hiding place.

Frémont's route from Fales Hot Springs to Antelope Valley can be accurately determined:

1. Photo enlargements of the Frémont-Preuss maps of the area clearly show the route of the expedition to be across Burcham Flat and east of the West Walker River until they are well past Mt. 8422 and further down the canyon. Significantly, the Mill Valley area and the rivers, mountains, and creeks of the area are clearly depicted as the route *not* used. [See map, page 94.]
2. Despite the one comment about his "intent" to follow Hot Springs Creek, all landmarks mentioned in the narrative are on the Burcham Flat-Mt. 8422 route. None are on the Mill Valley route.
3. A walking examination of the entire area shows there was no other reasonable route to the north.

As Frémont stated, January 28, 1844, was a most laborious day. Leaving their camp on Swauger Creek the party wearily trudged through Devil's Gate and passed Fales Hot Springs. Trying to reach Burcham Flat too quickly, they turned north into a series of steep embankments that nearly exhausted the men and animals, but after criss-crossing the exposed ridges to avoid the snow drifts in the depressions, they reached the south end of the Flat early in the afternoon. After rest and a meager lunch, they crossed the sagebrush covered

plain three miles to little Burcham Creek. The party with the cannon fell behind because of snow and thickly bunched, wire-like sagebrush. A healthy artemisia (sagebrush) plant is a formidable obstacle for mules to pull a half-ton of cannon, carriage, and ammunition through, over or around. It is normal for a man or animal to walk twenty to thirty yards around, rather than ten yards straight ahead over the spiny bushes which often are as tough as a roll of barbed wire. They arrived at Burcham Creek about 4 p.m., when Frémont and most of the party were probably setting up camp in the saddle of the mountain 1,000 feet above and one mile in front of them. By nightfall, the cannon party was about halfway up the south face of the mountain when they unhitched the mules, left the cannon, and rode on up to the camp.

The next morning, while the cannon party was going back down the south face of Mt. 8422 to retrieve the howitzer, Frémont, Fitzpatrick, and a few others rode down the north face of the mountain along a gradual trail to the river. As he talked with a group of Washoe Indians, Frémont looked around at the rugged ice and snow covered canyon. Knowing the cannon could go no farther, he sent a messenger, perhaps Kit Carson, back to the camp with this welcome news. The courier probably arrived in camp at about the same time as the cannon party returned with the cannon. It was a jubilant group that rode away from the little howitzer, sitting atop its carriage in a small meadow on this high, wind-swept mountain on the edge of the Sierra Nevada. They probably did try to cache the 500 pounds of ammunition, but they probably made no attempt to conceal or dismantle the cannon. They just rode away.

Why did Frémont requisition and take the cannon with him on an expedition entirely scientific in nature? Generations of historians have and still do take literary pot-shots at Frémont for this not insignificant incident. Numerous accusations have been made, everything from ingenious international plots to Frémont's delusions of grandeur. The most usual criticism was that it was totally unnecessary to the expedition. Frémont's stated reason for taking the cannon was that it was needed for defense against hostile Indians. This certainly could have been true. Frémont had been given quite a scare by marauding Indians at Fort Laramie just one year earlier. He undoubtedly had heard of traders William Sublette, William Becknell and others who had made very effective use of small cannons to protect their wagon trains of merchandise. He also knew that units of the First Dragoons wouldn't think of starting a campaign without their howitzers.

Somehow he heard of this older model French howitzer at the St. Louis Arsenal. He may have even seen it a number of times between 1838 and 1843. Because he requested the howitzer only one or two days before leaving on the expedition, some historians have read mystery and subterfuge into this. More probably, considering Frémont's impetuous nature, the thought struck him and he quickly acted on it.

As a "fait accompli," Frémont claimed only one incident where the howitzer played a decisive role and saved the expedition from an Indian attack. This was while in camp in the valley of the North Fork of the Platte River, August 5, 1843. He hinted at its deterrent capability on another occasion. Interestingly, when the ten men he sent back from Fort Hall arrived in St.

Louis, in newspaper interviews to a man they all claimed the howitzer was the only thing that saved them from the attack at the Platte River camp. The reason they were asked was because the howitzer had become a political issue. This was, of course, unknown to Frémont at the time. By November 1843, it was public knowledge that the War Department had refused to sanction Frémont's taking the cannon. Press leaks were as common then as now. Senator Benton was very upset and found that the "leak" came directly from Acting Secretary of War, James Madison Porter. On December 29, 1843, when Porter's appointment came before the Senate, Benton led the opposition and Porter's nomination was rejected by a vote of 38-3. Senator Benton was a very powerful politician and often brutally vindictive.

It has often been asserted that Frémont also disobeyed orders when he returned by way of California. This is rather ridiculous because his orders did not include a return route. In the first plan submitted to the war department, the expedition intended to return by the headwaters of the Missouri River. Later, probably in early April 1843, inter-department correspondence indicates the headwaters of the Arkansas River as the route of return. The Arkansas River route was much more desirable because of the heated border disputes with Mexico and Texas. Apparently during this expedition, as with earlier ones, only the main objective of the survey was in the written order. The return route was the province and responsibility of Frémont.

Frémont's epic, but near disastrous crossing of the

Sierra Nevada in mid-winter has inspired hours of discussion and reams of written comment, pro and con. As far as we know, he only considered two plans. His intended route of return was through Nevada, Utah, Colorado and the headwaters of the Arkansas and Bent's Fort. This was probably impossible on January 18, or 26, whenever he abandoned this plan. His animals were foot-sore and breaking down. Some were dying and some were being stolen and there was no place to find fresh healthy animals between his camp and Bent's Fort. The winter of 1843-44 was bitter cold in the Sierras, but the snowfall was relatively light. Historically, light snowfall in the Sierra usually means heavy snowfall in the Rockies. Even had he turned back up the Humboldt and gone back by way of Fort Hall, South Pass and Fort Laramie, it would have been a trek equal in difficulty and much longer than his final decision - his historic crossing of the central Sierra via Carson Pass to New Helvetia.

As previously mentioned, there was a third alternative apparently never considered. Why didn't he return to Truckee Meadows for a couple of months? He could have easily lived on the Cutthroat trout and other game in the area. There was excellent forage for his animals. And, well-rested they could have resumed their journey east along the intended route in early March or crossed the Sierra by Donner, Yuba or Henness passes in late March or early April. Either would have been preferable to the Sierra crossing in February. He would have saved the cannon, about seventy horses and mules, nine of his men and he wouldn't have subjected himself and the others to indescribable suffering.

But success explains or excuses almost any mistake,

especially in such a geographical and political climate. The cannon was abandoned, Frémont's desperate men were generously attended to by General Sutter, and his return did not go near or otherwise alarm Mexican officials. He steered well clear of Los Angeles and Santa Fe.

Impetuous, daring men such as Frémont inevitably extend themselves too far. A calculated risk does not include foolhardiness. Frémont did not understand that there are mountains too high, deserts too dry and places too far. Such men are to an extent self-destructive. They do not comprehend that others upon whom they must depend may not have their courage, determination or stamina. He was to commit this "sin" many times in his life and it would always prevent him from reaching the lofty pinnacles he sought to reach.

The Nevada Museum Cannon

THE BRONZE twelve-pound mountain howitzer in the Nevada Museum at Carson City has a fascinating history, and for well over a century it was believed to be Frémont's lost cannon. It is distinctive in that it is one of the first bronze artillery pieces manufactured in the United States, and it could be the cannon General Kearny lost at the Battle of San Pasqual.¹ It is not the cannon Frémont abandoned in the Sierras.

In the first half-century of the existence of the United States, most Army and Navy heavy guns were either purchased from other nations or captured in battle. Some found their way into U.S. arsenals as gifts from sympathetic allies. In the late 1820s, the U.S. Government recognized that this was an undesirable situation for an emerging nation, and initiated a program to manufacture its own cannons and other heavy weapons. In 1834, a private foundry, Cyrus Alger and Company of South Boston, Massachusetts, was selected to manufacture gun-metal bronze cannons. After considerable experimentation with the improvement of alloys and their proportions, the project was completed in early 1836. In June of that year, the U.S. Army was satisfied with the product and ordered a dozen twelve-pound mountain howitzers. The tubes were delivered in May 1837, and shortly thereafter outfitted with carriages and caissons at Watervliet Arsenal, West Troy, New York. The cost was \$225 each. The third howitzer

¹ See Appendix, herein.