

Pioneering

Exploring Las Vegas Street Names

The railroad officials who founded Las Vegas had a somewhat sketchy understanding of Western history. In 1905, they named all but one of the original nine east-west streets for famous explorers. However, the connection of some of them to Southern Nevada was remote at best. Two downtown streets derive their names from the early 19th century explorations of the American Northwest by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Their expedition was of great importance in the opening of the West, but their route was far to the north of Nevada. Benjamin Bonneville and Jim Bridger didn't get much closer. Captain Bonneville, though immortalized in the writings of Washington Irving, was but a marginal figure in the Western fur trade. His trading post on Wyoming's Green River was so little used that it was nicknamed "Fort Nonsense."

Bridger, a famous mountain man and fur trader, is credited with many accomplishments, including the first explorations of the Great Salt Lake. His closest approach to Southern Nevada might have been a brief trapping foray along the Humboldt River in Northern Nevada. Two of Bridger's associates, more worthy of recognition in Southern Nevada, have yet to be memorialized in street names. Fur trapper Jedediah Smith made path-breaking explorations in Southern Nevada in the 1820s, and famed black mountain man Jim Beckwourth crossed through Las Vegas Valley a time or two in the 1840s.



Kit Carson and John C. Fremont. Kit Carson was Fremont's guide on the expedition that literally put Las Vegas on American maps.

Four of the downtown streets are named for explorers of genuine significance to Nevada. Hudson's Bay Company fur trapper Peter Skene Ogden was the first outsider to explore the length of the Humboldt River, and he traversed that

region extensively. One epic trek in 1829, from Oregon to the Colorado River, likely brought him through or very close to Las Vegas Valley. Spaniard Francisco Garcés blazed the western leg of the Old Spanish Trail to California, near the southern tip of the state, in 1776. Las Vegas' main thoroughfare is aptly named for John C. Fremont, who camped here in 1844 and mapped a later version of that trail through Las Vegas. The much-celebrated Kit Carson was Fremont's guide on the expedition that literally put Las Vegas on American maps. The ninth original street was named for Helen J. Stewart, who owned

and managed the Las Vegas Ranch from 1884 until 1901.

The Gamble of Domínguez and Escalante

July 4, 1776. The Liberty Bell pealed in Philadelphia while half a continent away, in the Spanish province of New Mexico, Franciscan priests Francisco Dominguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante lamented a delay in the commencement of their grand project. It was the day set for their departure on a trailblazing expedition that they hoped would lead to a suitable overland route from New Mexico to the new presidio at Monterey in Alta California.

Father Escalante's illness delayed them until July 29.

Then, Ute Indian guides helped the padres and their eight companions forge a sweeping route northwest from Santa Fe into the valley of Utah Lake in present day Utah. The expedition's cartographer, Don Bernardo Miera, drew remarkably accurate maps of this previously unexplored region. He did make errors that bedeviled posterity; his map showed two large rivers flowing westward toward San Francisco Bay. Fur trappers and explorers who came later searched long and fruitlessly for these great potential avenues of commerce.

Fremont Street in 1949. The street bears the name of the intrepid explorer.



By early October, Dominguez, Escalante, and the eight others were in dire trouble in their southwesterly course along the present route of Interstate 15 in what is now southwestern Utah. One day's journey of some 50 miles had been without water. The crisis eased the next day, as they found salty but potable water. On October 5, a cold wind sprang up, a foreboding of the snow that began on the sixth. As it became apparent that winter had set in, Domínguez and Escalante wisely thought better of attempting to complete the crossing to Monterey, still some 520 air miles distant. Don Bernardo, seeing glory and honor slipping from his grasp, grumbled openly, converting others to his view that they were but a week out from their destination.

The padres proposed a solution: they would solicit God's will by prayer, and by the casting of lots. On October 11, Divine Will confirmed the decision to return to Santa Fe. Once again in harmony, the party turned toward the Colorado River and home. What historians came to call the "Old Spanish Trail" was still more idea than reality. Had they continued on their original course, history might have credited them with the discovery of Las Vegas Valley. It is one of the gentler ironies of history that Las Vegas failed of discovery by a gamble.

Mexican Traders Miss the Springs

One of the chief delights of the study of history is that there are few immutable truths. Many historical "facts" turn out on closer examina-

tion to be misunderstandings. For example, it's more or less common "knowledge" that Las Vegas sat astride the Old Spanish Trail, which, in the nineteenth century, carried commerce between New Mexico and Southern California. Most historical maps attest to this. It is clear that Las Vegas was a watering stop on a trail, portions of which can still be discerned. But was it the Old Spanish Trail?

The first commercial caravan known to have passed through Las Vegas Valley was led by New Mexican merchant Antonio Armijo in early 1830. Armijo carried woven goods to exchange for California livestock. Careful research by Elizabeth Warren¹ demonstrates that Armijo's route barely skirted the southern edge of the valley. While trading caravans moved more or less regularly across the Mojave Desert for the next eighteen years, no other party is known to have used Armijo's route. Most bypassed Las Vegas altogether and instead traveled south, following the Colorado River to Needles, in present day California. From that point they followed a trail west, first marked by Spanish explorer Francisco Garcés in 1776. That, properly speaking, should be called the Old Spanish Trail.

How then did it come to be understood that the Old Spanish Trail came through Las Vegas? American explorer John C. Fremont confidently but mistakenly assumed he was on the Old Spanish Trail in 1844 when he followed a rugged trail eastward over Mountain Springs Pass between Pahrump and Las Vegas Valley. He so recorded it in his report, which

received wide distribution. When Americans carried Fremont's report and maps through the area in greater numbers over the next few years, they followed his route and his nomenclature. However, Fremont's trail through Las Vegas was neither old nor Spanish.

In many accounts of the first people of European heritage to pass through Las Vegas Valley, the name Rafael Rivera looms very large — maybe too large. According to legend, Rivera was the first non-native to view the valley. In truth, very little is actually known about him. In late 1829 and early 1830, Rivera served as a scout for the Armijo pack train. On Christmas Day 1829, according to Armijo's journal, the party camped on the Virgin River about a hundred miles northeast of Las Vegas. Rivera and several others departed on a reconnaissance mission. The scouting party returned a week later without Rivera. During that time, the main group had reached the Colorado River and was following it southward. On January 7, thirteen days after his departure, Rivera rejoined the others at the mouth of Las Vegas Wash. Where had Rivera been? He reported that he had recognized Mohave Indian villages and a crossing of the Colorado he had seen the year before. The villages and crossing were about ninety miles downriver from Las Vegas.

Armijo chose not to follow Rivera's path. Instead, he led the party westward, passing through what is now Green Valley. Their only two overnight stops in or near Las Vegas Valley were dry camps. The record

clearly indicates that Rivera had not seen, let alone named, Las Vegas Springs, as many history books incorrectly claim. It was some later and as yet unidentified party that would happen upon the springs and record the place as The Meadows on Mexican maps.

Why go to into such detail to revise a historical interpretation? Because without constant rethinking, bad information can become the basis of popular belief.

Jedediah Smith

Only twenty-seven years old, Jedediah Smith was, by 1826, already a legend in the fledgling American fur trade in the Rocky Mountains. Two years earlier, the Bible-toting mountain man had earned his place in American history as the discoverer of South Pass, that broad highway through the Rockies for later thousands of Oregon- and California-bound



Jedediah Smith

emigrants. In the late summer of 1826, he was about to add to his list of achievements. Searching for new fur trapping areas, he had arrived at the Virgin River of what is now southwestern Utah. For part of his route, he had followed in the footsteps of the Domínguez-Escalante expedition of almost exactly fifty years earlier.

Unlike his Francis- can predecessors who veered off toward Santa Fe, Smith continued down the Virgin to its juncture with the Colorado. He thereby became the first American to enter the territory of the present state of Nevada.

By October, Smith and a handful of companions were in a race with starvation as they struggled through rugged terrain along the east bank of the Colorado. Having lost half of their horses and fearing for their lives, they finally reached help at the Mojave

Indian villages near the present site of Needles, California.

After fifteen days of recuperation, Smith traded with the Mojaves for supplies and fresh horses and then struck westward over an ages-old Indian trade route to the southern coast of California. Again he trod where a Spanish padre had earlier passed. In 1776, Francisco Garces had been guided over the same route from the Colorado to San Gabriel Mission. Smith's trek forged the key central link in what became known as the Old Spanish Trail, fulfilling the dream of the Spanish explorers of 1776.

John C. Fremont

In the 1840s and 1850s, John C. Fremont explored much of Nevada and named many of the state's most prominent geographical features. His name and that of his famous guide, Kit Carson, are memorialized by street names in downtown Las Vegas.

In 1844, Fremont led a large exploring party on the last leg of a thirty-five-hundred-mile trek around that vast western region he

1840

- 1826**
Jedediah Smith enters Nevada region.
- 1830**
Armijo caravan travels through Las Vegas Valley.
- 1844**
John C. Fremont camps in Las Vegas.

1848 GOLD DISCOVERED IN CALIFORNIA

- 1849**
California gold rush begins.



- 1860–80s**
Silver and gold draw miners to Nevada.

1860

- 1860**
The first bank opens in Nevada.
- The first mill built in Galena, Nevada for processing ore from the Comstock Lode.
- 1864**
Nevada becomes a state.

HOMESTEAD ACT OF 1862 (REPEALED IN 1976)

CIVIL WAR 1861–1865

- 1869**
John Wesley Powell expedition runs the length of the Grand Canyon in boats.
- 1867**
U.S. purchases Alaska territory from Russia.

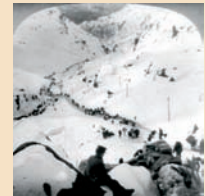


- 1884**
Archibald Stewart is killed.

1880

1873 FINANCIAL PANIC

- 1889**
50,000 Oklahoma settlers rush to claim former Indian lands given away by Federal Government.
- 1890**
U.S. Census Bureau deems the Western frontier closed and settled.
- 1900**
Alaskan Klondike, Canadian Yukon draw 60,000 gold miners.



Many miners died on the dangerous trail to Dawson, Alaska.



John C. Fremont

called the Great Basin. His journal entry for May 3 gives us one of our earliest glimpses of Las Vegas. “We camped,” he said, “at a camping ground called Las Vegas — a term which the Spanish use to signify fertile or marshy plains. Two narrow streams of clear water, four or five feet deep, gush suddenly with a quick current, from two singularly large springs. They afforded a delightful bathing place.”

Fremont and his party camped but one night at Las Vegas. On May

4, they resumed their journey toward the region that is now northern Utah. Fremont kept meticulous records of the route they followed. Their path after leaving the area of Nevada was, in fact, a variant of the Old Spanish Trail begun by the Spanish Fathers, Domínguez and Escalante, in 1776. The widely circulated report of the expedition was of major importance to the future development of Southern Nevada. Three years later, Fremont’s trail became an important route between southern California and the new Mormon community of Salt Lake City. In 1855, a small party of men from Salt Lake made the first attempt to create a permanent settlement at Las Vegas, Fremont’s camping spot of eleven years earlier.

A Valley Called Death

“Never take no cut offs and hurry along as fast as you can.” This was advice to future overland emigrants given by a thirteen-year-old survivor of the tragic Donner-Reed Party of 1846. If the large party of forty-niners camped along the Old Spanish Trail in early November 1849 had

heard the advice, they chose to ignore it.

One of them produced a map showing a shortcut to California across the desert north of Las Vegas. Their Mormon guide, Jefferson Hunt, a hardened veteran of the customary trail, advised them against the untried route. “I believe you will get into the jaws of hell,” he warned. Only twenty-seven wagons followed Hunt south along the known route. The majority, with a hundred wagons and many pack animals, turned westward into the unknown.

Among this group was a young trapper named William Manly, who was headed for the California gold fields with his friends, the Bennett family.

The sheer walls of Beaver Dam Wash soon blocked their advance. After three days of futile exploration, most of the emigrants left the spot they called Mount Misery and retraced their steps to follow Hunt toward Las Vegas. A few abandoned their wagons and trekked down the wash and linked up later with Hunt at the Muddy River. The others,

[1900]		[1920]		[1940]	
		WORLD WAR I 1914—1919		THE GREAT DEPRESSION	
				US IN WORLD WAR II 1941—1945	
1902 Helen Stewart sells Las Vegas Ranch.	1928 President Hoover signs the Boulder Canyon Act, by 1931 thousands of unemployed people come looking for work on the dam construction project.	1946 Baby boom begins as war veterans return, marry and start families. U.S. housing-starts up from 144,000 to 1.7 million.	1948 Second McCarran Airport on the south Strip opens.	1959 Las Vegas Convention Center opens.	1980 Las Vegas area population is 45-90 per square mile. (Nevada’s population: 798,523)
1905 Auction of the Las Vegas town site.	1935 FDR dedicates Hoover Dam. (Then called Boulder Dam.) 1941 Army Air Force gunnery school opens in Las Vegas.	1947 Nevada Legislature creates the Las Vegas Valley Water District.	1949 The gunnery school is re-activated as Nellis AFB.	1963 Voters approve bonds for current McCarran Airport.	2004 Las Vegas is 2.3 million, people; is the fastest growing city in U.S. for the eighteenth year.
1910 Nevada population fewer than two people per square mile. U.S. population hits 91.6 million. Urban pop. exceeds rural for first time.			1950 Population of Southern Nevada grows to 6-18 people per square mile. (entire state: 160,083 persons) U.S. population 151 million.	1969 Corporate Gaming OK’d by state legislature.	USA population reaches 295 million.

with twenty-seven wagons, struck out over a forbidding route to the north and west.

On November 21, Jefferson Hunt and his charges reached safety at the oasis of Las Vegas. About the same time, and nearly dead from thirst, those who had continued on the cutoff approached Papoose Dry Lake on the edge of what became the Nevada Test Site. They called it Misery Lake. Disheartened and demoralized, they splintered into several smaller groups. These pioneers were to face many more trials before stumbling by diverse routes into a valley that takes its name from their suffering — Death Valley.

The Reverend John Brier, with his wife and three young sons, trailed

behind a group of men calling themselves the Jayhawkers. Manly, the Bennetts, and other families struck off in another direction.

In late December, the Jayhawkers, followed by the Briers, crossed the Funeral Mountains into Death Valley. Mrs. Brier later described that Christmas Eve: “Night came on,” she said, “and we lost all track of those ahead. I would get down and look in the starlight for the ox tracks and we would stumble on.” Christmas dinner the next evening was ox meat, black coffee and a little bread.

Meanwhile, Manly’s group came upon the Brier trail and the young man faced a powerful temptation. Scouting ahead, Manly knew he

could push on alone and save himself. Instead, he led his charges to the Briers’ recently vacated Christmas camp. Enduring almost incredible hardship, the Briers finally reached help at a California rancho on February 4. Manly and another man had already been there and heroically returned to Death Valley with supplies for the Bennetts and others still stranded. Barely alive, that part of the original party emerged from the desert in early March. Without William Manly’s Christmas Eve resolve, they would surely have perished.



Archibald and Helen Stewart

The Killing of Archibald Stewart

On July 13, 1884, Archibald Stewart returned to his Las Vegas Ranch from a business trip to the mining camps at Eldorado Canyon. In his absence, his wife, Helen, had words with one Schyler Henry, a disgruntled hired hand. Demanding, but not receiving his pay, Henry announced that he was quitting and set out for Conrad Kiel's ranch a couple of miles north.

Mrs. Stewart told her husband of the quarrel upon his return. After eating and resting, Archibald threw his rifle on his shoulder and rode away, but Mrs. Stewart saw no reason for alarm, because he did not appear to be heading in the direction of the Kiel Ranch and potential trouble.

A short time later, a scrawled note arrived. "Mrs. Sturd. Send a team and take Mr. Sturd away. He is dead." The note was signed "C. Kiel."

Sadly, Mrs. Stewart buried her husband the next day in a casket made of the wooden doors of the ranch house. Apart from old Conrad Kiel and Schyler Henry, there were apparently no other witnesses to the shooting. Outlaw Hank Parrish, who would be hanged for a later murder, was known to have been in the area but could not be found. At the inquest, Henry claimed self-defense. Stewart had run toward him, he said, and had shot first. An exchange of gunfire left Henry wounded and Stewart dead.

What really happened that July 13? Did Stewart intend to confront Henry about the quarrel and be-

come instead a victim himself? Or was he, as Mrs. Stewart believed, lured to his death? Whatever really happened, Helen Stewart was left to raise a family and operate the ranch herself until its sale in 1902 led to the founding of Las Vegas.

Chapter Notes

¹Elizabeth von Till Warren, *Armijo's trace revisited: A new interpretation of the impact of the Antonio Armijo Route of 1829-1830 on the development of the Old Spanish Trail*



Archibald Stewart



Helen Stewart in later years.