

## FIRST DRAFT

# ROADWORK AHEAD

### First road across Western Colorado was part of a military mission

In the summer of 1858, 50 horse-drawn wagons, accompanied by 300 soldiers, rumbled through the Grand Valley, heading from Utah to New Mexico.

They crossed the Colorado River here, which must have been low when they reached it.

"The ford commences on a pebbly bank which leaves the northern side and runs toward the center of the river," wrote Col. William W. Loring, who commanded the expedition. The water that reached to the wagon bottoms was only "what the mountain people call a 'riffle.'"

They were about three miles east of today's 5th Street Bridge, near 29 Road when they forded. They crossed two islands and climbed a steep incline on the south side of the river.

It was the largest collection of wheeled vehicles to cross Western Colorado at the time. The soldiers built the first road in this part of the state, roughly following the Old Spanish Trail.

Loring was seeking a good route for supplies from Fort Union in northeastern New Mexico to the Army's Camp Floyd, which was then under construction on the west side of Utah Lake at today's Fairfield, Utah.

Although Camp Floyd lasted only a few years, the road Loring's troops constructed served as a major transportation artery between New Mexico and the Salt Lake Valley until the arrival of railroads more than 20 years later.

It was known as the Salt Lake Wagon Road and it appeared on multiple maps of the era. Ruts from the wagon road can still be seen in the desert between Grand Junction and Delta. Most of U.S. Highway 50 between Gunnison and Grand Junction either parallels or overlays the 1858 wagon road.

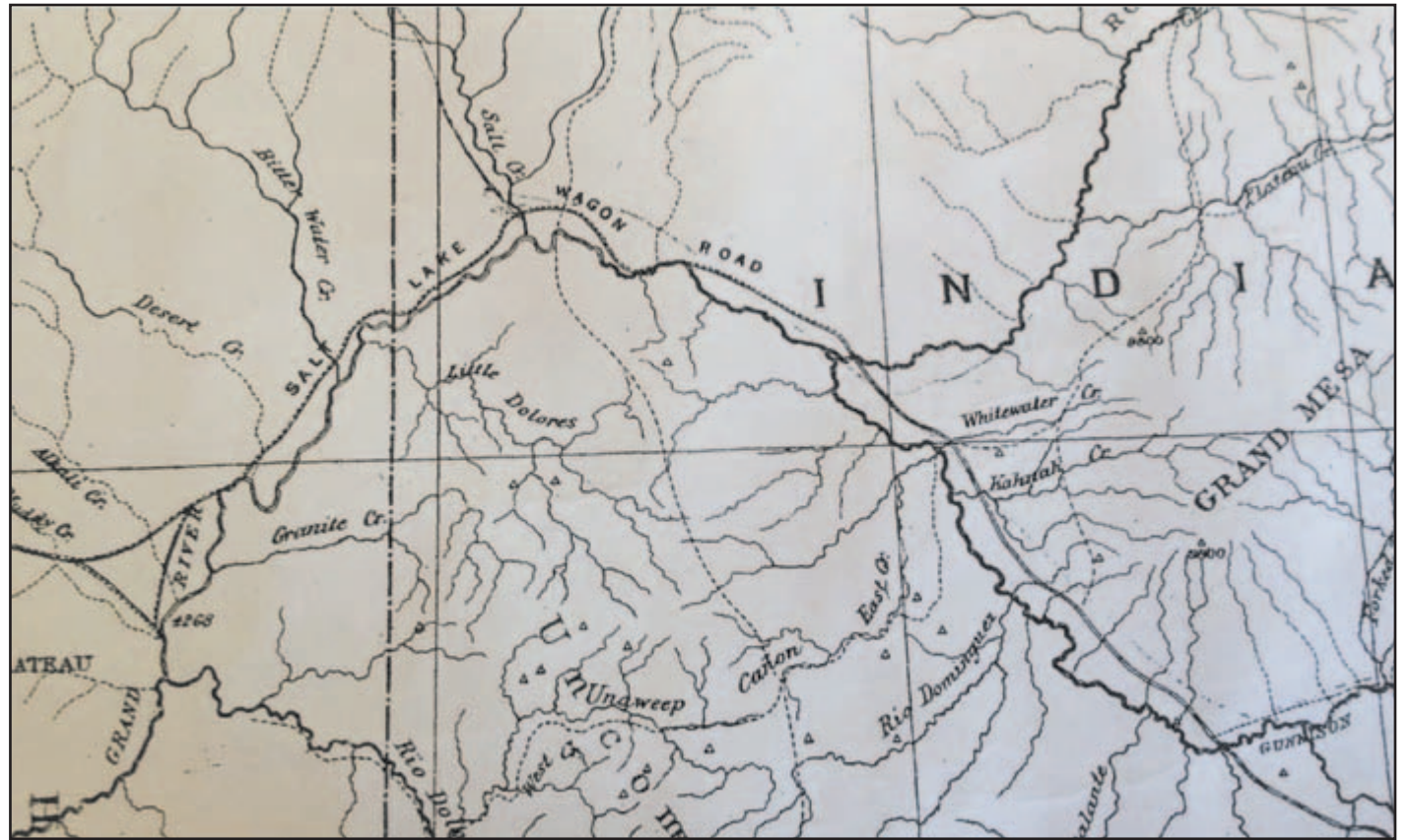
Throughout 1857 and early 1858, the U.S. government anticipated war with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — the Mormons. Gen. Albert Sydney Johnston established temporary headquarters at Fort Bridger in southwestern Wyoming in preparation for the war.

By June 1858, the threat of war had ended, and the Army began constructing Camp Floyd under an agreement reached with Brigham Young. The camp included more than 3,500 military and civilian employees, the largest single troop concentration in the United States at the time.

But providing supplies for the camp, far removed from other Army bases, was a logistical headache when most routes in the region were just trails developed for pack horses and mules.

So Loring was assigned to find the best route for a wagon road from Camp Floyd to Fort Union, which then connected to Fort Leavenworth in Kansas over the Santa Fe Trail.

Loring left Camp Floyd on July 19, 1858. His detachment included three companies of Mounted Rifles, an early form of cavalry, and three companies of infantry. Experienced western explorer Antoine LeRoux served as scout.



BOB SILBERNAGEL COLLECTION

A close up of a portion of the Hayden Survey map of Western Colorado from 1874-74 shows the Salt Lake Wagon Road coming from eastern Utah, making a loop through the Grand Valley, then heading southeast to the crossing of the Gunnison River near today's Delta.

Loring wasn't the first Army officer to lead wheeled vehicles here. Capt. John Gunnison brought 20 wagons across Western Colorado and Central Utah in 1853, while searching for a central route for a transcontinental railroad. But Gunnison didn't attempt to build a permanent road.

Loring and his troops, in contrast, worked hard to build a road that would be serviceable for years.

For instance, on July 28, Loring's 300 men were near today's Salina, Utah, and then crossed Salina Creek six times. "Had to cut down the banks of the creek, clear out the fallen timber in the narrow canon, cut down steep ascents and excavate the sides of the mountain, to enable the (wagon) train to pass," Loring said.

The expedition had traveled almost due south from Utah Lake to Salina Creek, before turning eastward. But, when the detachment reached the Price River, which Loring called the White River, near the Green River, he realized there was a shorter route.

"We are confirmed in the opinion that a road can be made up the White River to Salt Lake Valley, by way of Provo Fork or ... possibly the Spanish Fork," he wrote on Aug. 4. That is essentially the route followed by U.S. Highway 6 today from Green River to Provo.

Loring estimated this route would cut 200 miles from the distance his road-building team traveled. It actually saves about 100 miles.

On Aug. 7, the expedition reached the Green River and crossed it without incident. The next day they continued east, and Loring reported his first sighting of Grand Mesa, which he called Elk Mountain. He also sighted the Gray Mountains, or Book Cliffs, to the north.

By Aug. 11, they had reached the

Grand River, today's Colorado River, just east of Cisco, Utah.

It took them until Aug. 17 to reach the crossing of the Colorado at 29 Road, which they forded with little difficulty.

The expedition continued south to Whitewater Creek, Kannah Creek, and the crossing of the Gunnison River west of today's city of Delta, at Robidoux Creek.

The soldiers and wagons traveled with relative ease through the Uncompahgre Valley, then faced difficult work to build the road east over Cimarron Pass and parallel to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. They turned south again when they were east of today's city of Gunnison.

Loring and his men encountered several bands of Ute Indians during their mission. The largest group visited them on Aug. 30, near Cochetopa Pass.

"While here, a large body of Tabawatche (sic) Utahs rode into camp, professing friendship and appeared very much alarmed that they would not be kindly received," Loring wrote.

The Utes had met New Mexico traders who told them Loring and his troops would attack them. After Loring and LeRoux convinced the Indians that was not the case, the Tabeguache Utes said they were "very much pleased to see troops passing through their country," Loring wrote.

The soldiers must have been alarmed when, on Sept. 8, near the southern end of the San Luis Valley,

"a band of over 100 Utah Indian warriors came into camp, dressed and painted for war." But they weren't preparing to attack the troopers. "They said they were in pursuit of a band of Arrapahoes (sic) they had heard were in the valley," Loring wrote.

Loring and his road builders reached Fort Union, east of Santa Fe, on Sept. 13, 1858, having worked for 56 days and covered, according to Loring's calculations, 637 miles. Modern highway mileage shows the distance at roughly 700 miles.

Camp Floyd was closed in 1861 and its troops sent east for the Civil War. But the road Loring and his men pioneered was an important emigrant route for decades. In 1884, naturalist Ernest Ingersoll said the road was "in former days was one of the paths to Salt Lake and California."

When the Civil War began, Loring left the U.S. Army and became a brigadier general in the Confederate Army.

In 1870, he was hired by Egypt to command that country's coastal defenses. He died in New York City in 1886.

Sources: "Colonel Loring's Expedition Across Colorado in 1858," edited by LeRoy Hafen, *The Colorado Magazine*, March, 1946; "Consideration of the Route of the Northern Branch of the Spanish Trail From the Cochetopa Pass Area to the Uncompahgre Valley," by Jon Horn, *Alpine Archaeological Consultants Inc.*; F.V. Hayden Survey maps of Colorado.

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PUBLIC DOMAIN THROUGH WIKIMEDIA COMMONS  
William Loring as he appeared when he served the Egyptian government around 1870.



AN ARMY TRAIN CROSSING THE PLAINS  
Army Crossing as depicted in Harpers Weekly  
April 24, 1858

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

An 1858 drawing from Harper's Weekly Magazine gives an impression of what an Army wagon caravan, such as the one commanded by Col. William Loring that same year, would have appeared.



PUBLIC DOMAIN THROUGH WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Camp Floyd, Utah, as it appeared in early 1859.