

## FIRST DRAFT

# RIO SAN BUENAVENTURA:

## The great east-west waterway that never existed

President James K. Polk refused to believe explorer John Fremont when they met at the White House in 1845 and Fremont told him there was no great river running westward from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean.

Polk had seen maps, such as the one on this page, which clearly depicted the Rio Buenaventura flowing from the Rockies in Colorado or Wyoming to the west, across the Wasatch Mountains, the Great Basin and the Sierra Nevada to empty into San Francisco Bay.

For part of the 18th century and nearly half of the 19th century, cartographers and explorers, politicians and promoters imagined a major east-west river that never existed.

At least most of it never existed. The headwaters of what became known as the Buenaventura did exist. Today we call it the Green River.

It was designated the Rio San Buenaventura by Fathers Francisco Antanasio Dominguez and Silvester Vélez de Escalante — along with their mapmaker, Captain Bernardo Miera y Pacheco — during their famous 1776 journey through Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico.

The fact that a river that runs mostly southward to merge with the Colorado River near today's Moab, Utah, became featured on maps as a major east-west water artery is a story of topographical confusion, conjecture and the centuries-old assumption that there just had to be a major waterway crossing North America.

Beginning with European sailors searching for a Northwest Passage, followed by French and English fur traders hoping to travel west from the Great Lakes to the Pacific, then Meriwether Lewis and William Clark seeking

an easy connection between the Missouri River and the Columbia, Euro-Americans were convinced there was an aquatic path to the Pacific Ocean. After all, water was the primary avenue for commercial transportation from East Coast to the Mississippi River. Why not in the West?

During their 1776 journey, Fathers Dominguez and Escalante were seeking a land route from New Mexico to California. On their circuitous travels, they reached the Green River near present-day Jensen, Utah, on Sept. 13, 1776.

“After traveling two leagues (about 5.2 miles) to the northwest we arrived at a large river which we called San Buenaventura,” Escalante wrote in his journal. “The river enters this meadow between two high cliffs which ... come so close together that one can scarcely see the opening through which the river comes.” Today that opening is called Split Mountain.

In lavishly illustrated maps, Miera showed the San Buenaventura flowing southwestward across the Wasatch Plateau and into Sevier Lake, which he named Lake Miera. Sevier Lake is a intermittently dry basin in southwestern Utah, fed by the Sevier and Beaver rivers.

Miera also combined Utah Lake, which the expedition visited, and the Great Salt Lake, which the expedition did not see, into one large lake called Lake Timpanogos, named after a band of Natives they encountered near Utah Lake.

Additionally, Miera mistakenly made the Sevier River a downstream section of the Green, or Buenaventura River. Escalante was less certain of that connection.

When they camped on the Sevier River on Sept. 29, their Native guides told them it was the Buenaventura. But, Escalante wrote, “We doubt



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Anthony Finley, a mapmaker from Philadelphia, produced several maps that showed the Rio Buenaventura flowing from the Rocky Mountains to San Francisco Bay. This map shows it flowing into and out of Salt Lake, although he has Salt Lake positioned approximately where Sevier Lake actually is. His map also shows a single Lake Timpanogos roughly where Utah Lake and the Great Salt Lake are located.

**PICTURED BELOW:** Explorer John Fremont is the man credited with dispelling the myth of the Rio Buenaventura, although he initially believed the river existed.

whether this is the case, because here it carries much less water than where we crossed it” near Jensen. Major rivers usually carry more water downstream, not less, as smaller streams flow into them.

Nevertheless, Miera showed the Buenaventura flowing into Miera (or Sevier) Lake at the western edge of his map. In a later report for the king of Spain, he suggested it might offer a water connection to the Pacific.

Miera's map was used by subsequent mapmakers to continue the fiction of a major east-west waterway. One of the first was a 1784 map of Spanish North America by two Spanish cartographers, Mascaró and Costansó. They showed the San Buenaventura following the path imagined by Miera's map to Sevier Lake, then extended a river near San Diego, California, extending eastward almost to Sevier Lake.

Two decades later, Prussian explorer Alexander Von

Humbolt traveled extensively in South America and Mexico, but did not visit the American Southwest. Still, when he published a book about his travels in 1804, he included a map of North America that relied heavily on the Mascaró-Costansó map. He gave a copy of his map to U.S. President Thomas Jefferson when he visited Washington that year.

Zebulon Pike, who traveled in the West in 1806, used Humbolt's map as a basis for his own map of his travels in New Mexico.

Later, other mapmakers who had never been to the West confidently placed the Rio Buenaventura on their maps as a westward connection between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific. By 1824, the Great Salt Lake had been “discovered” by American fur trappers. So, mapmakers such as Anthony Finley of Philadelphia had the Buenaventura flow into and out of the Salt Lake, although he mistakenly placed it roughly where Sevier Lake sits.

Enter John Fremont, who made five exploratory trips across the West in the 1840s and early 1850s, two of them with Kit Carson as a guide. With political and financial support from his father-in-law, Sen. Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, Fremont was primarily seeking a suitable transcontinental railroad route.

On his second expedition in 1843 and 1844, after visiting the Great Salt Lake and exploring the Great Basin, the Northwest and the California coast, he and his party headed southeast. It was winter, and Fremont was eager to find the Buenaventura.

Having consulted “the best maps in my possession,” Fremont expected to reach the great river, where, he said, “our horses might find grass to sustain them, and ourselves be sheltered from the rigors of

winter and from the inhospitable desert.”

He was understandably disappointed when he determined that no cross-continental river existed.

“No river from the interior does, or can, cross the Sierra Nevada,” he wrote. And, although he had encountered a small river flowing into San Francisco Bay that the locals called the Buenaventura, Fremont said, “It is, in fact, a small stream of no consequence.”

When he visited President Polk in March 1845, accompanied by Sen. Benton, Fremont said, “The president seemed skeptical (sic) about the exactness of my information. He evidently ‘respected that ancient chaos’ of the western geography as it existed on the old maps.” He also wrote that Polk, referring to Fremont, “said something of the impulsiveness of young men.”

Despite Polk's reaction, Fremont was correct, and he is credited as the man who dispelled the myth of Rio Buenaventura. Even so, others — fur trappers and explorers — had reached the same conclusion before Fremont, a fact Fremont acknowledged in his memoirs.

The River of Good Fortune, as its name translates into English, proved to be a most unfortunate myth.

**Sources:** “Memoirs of My Life,” by John Charles Fremont; “The San Buenaventura, Mythical River of the West,” by C. Gregory Crampton and Gloria G. Griffen, *Pacific Historical Review*, May, 1956; “Pageant in the Wilderness: The Story of the Escalante Expedition to the Interior Basin, 1776,” by Herbert Bolton; “An Imaginary River: The Legend of the Rio Buenaventura,” by Megan Weiss, for Utah Humanities.org, [www.utahhumanities.org/stories/items/show/418](http://www.utahhumanities.org/stories/items/show/418).

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This map, drawn by Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco in 1778, shows the territory traversed by the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition in 1776. But, he imagined some things that didn't exist. The dark line running across the top left quarter of the map is the Rio de San Buenaventura. On his map, it flows around the north edge of the Laguna de Miera, today known as Sevier Lake. Because the map ends there, he doesn't show its westward route beyond the lake, but he believed it offered a connection to the Pacific Ocean.

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