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Fighting the Smallpox Epidemic of 1837-38: The Response of the American Fur Company Traders

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Credit: Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly; Volume 19, 4 and Volume 20, 1

The smallpox epidemic of 1837-38, which spread north along the upper Missouri River, devastated the Native Americans of the northern Great Plains. Though the mortality rate of this deadly epidemic cannot be established with certainty, historians agree it was one of the worst disasters ever to strike the native population.[1] Between 1819 and 1837, only a few outbreaks of smallpox occurred among the plains Indians, and these were confined to the tribes of the central plains along the Platte and Kansas rivers. The tribes of the upper Missouri had been free of the disease since the epidemic of 1801-02.[2] A lapse of more than thirty years between epidemics assured that when smallpox struck these northern tribes in 1837 the virus would thrive in a largely unexposed population. Without intervention in the form of smallpox vaccine, the burden of effective medical action to counter the disease fell to the field agents of the American Fur Company.

Isolated and without vaccine, the traders on the upper Missouri were left with few alternatives in responding to the spread of smallpox among the local tribes. One alternative was resignation in the face of an epidemiological disaster little understood by trader and Indian alike. A second alternative was to assume responsibility for fighting the "plague" by employing less effective medical practices to arrest the spread of disease. Both responses were evident during the epidemic of 1837. Indeed, an analysis of the efforts and attitudes of the traders at two upper Missouri posts, Fort Clark and Fort Union, illustrates that in the absence of vaccine the agents of the American Fur Company either relied on traditional methods to fight the epidemic or fell back on traditional, fatalistic notions regarding contagious disease. Neither response would prevent the disaster of 1837. Yet much may be learned from the actions of the traders which sheds light on the traders' perceptions of their role on the fur frontier of the 1830's. That vaccine was not made available to the Indians of the upper Missouri was the consequence of government policy. By the 1830's, the "vaccine wars" that arose in the medical profession between the proponents and opponents of Edward Jenner's experiments with cowpox virus had subsided. Jenner's medical findings, in fact, found a responsive audience more quickly in the United States than in his native England. The significance of smallpox vaccine to the highly susceptible North American population was quickly realized, and as early as 1802 Thomas Jefferson ordered the vaccination of Indian delegations arriving in Washington. In 1820, an army expedition carried vaccine to the upper Missouri, though the vaccine was destroyed in a keel-boat wreck before it could be used.[3] In 1832, the federal government took a direct hand in the vaccination of its Indian population. By an act passed May 5, Congress directed the Secretary of War:

> to take such measures as he shall deem most efficient to convene the Indian tribes in their respective towns, or in such other places and numbers and at such seasons as shall be most convenient to the Indian population , for the purpose of arresting the progress of smallpox among the several tribes by vaccination.

The act further authorized the Secretary, Lewis Cass, to hire physicians and guides to attend tribes suffering from

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smallpox or in danger of infection.[4] Yet within days of the passage of this act, Cass wrote John Dougherty, head of the government's Indian agency at Fort Leavenworth, that no effort would be forthcoming to send vaccine to the tribes of the upper Missouri.[5]

In light of the epidemic of 1837-38, Cass's decision deserves some attention. Congress had supplied only $12,000 for Indian vaccine. Thus, the Secretary's decision to forego vaccination on the upper Missouri may have been based on the costs of sustaining a vaccination program for the widely scattered native population estimated at 290,000 in 1832. But in 1838, T. Hartley Crawford, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, reported to Congress that an effective vaccination program for the western tribes could be undertaken at a cost of $0.06 per vaccination.[6] Assuming Crawford's estimate was both reasonable and applicable to conditions in 1832, it seems likely the funds allocated by Congress in 1832 would have supported a program of vaccination among the northern plain tribes. More likely, Cass's decision stemmed from reports he received the previous winter on the western fur trade. In November and December 1831, Cass received reports from Indian agents stating trade had been disrupted greatly by the hostility of the Indians toward the American trappers and traders. These reports estimated over 230 Americans had been killed or injured and nearly $150,000 in property lost in conflicts on the plains between 1815 and 1831. Such losses may have left the Secretary fearful of sending men too far up the Missouri or indifferent to the fate of these northern plains hostiles.[7] Whatever Cass's reasoning, his 1832 decision not to vaccinate the tribes of the upper Missouri was sustained during the intervening years before smallpox struck the northern plains in 1837. Smallpox came to the upper Missouri aboard the American Fur Company steamboat, *St. Peter*. On its supply voyage north to Fort Clark and Fort Union in the spring of 1837, smallpox broke out among the ship's crew. By the time the *St. Peter* reached the government's agency for the Sioux near Fort Pierre, in early June, three Arikara passengers traveling to Fort Clark were in the advanced stages of the disease. Though they had recovered before disembarking at Fort Clark on June 19, the Arikaras remained infectious and introduced the disease to the villages near the post. Meanwhile, Jacob Halsey had boarded the steamboat at Fort Pierre to make the journey to Fort Union where he was to take up his new post as chief trader for the American Fur Company. After leaving Fort Clark, Halsey came down with smallpox. His case, however, was not a serious one, for he was recovering by the time the *St. Peter* reached Fort Union on June 24. Nevertheless, Halsey remained infectious, thereby bringing the virus to the northern post.[8]

The responses of the American Fur Company agents at Fort Clark and Fort Union to smallpox differed greatly. At Fort Clark, the Company's trading agent, Francis Chardon, accepted the outbreak and spread of the disease with resignation. His journal – one of the few primary sources for the epidemic of 1837-38 – indicates he did little to intervene in the epidemic until threats made by the Indians on the lives of the white traders for "causing" the disease prompted him to action. At Fort Union, on the other hand, Halsey and his fellow Companyman, Charles Larpenteur, moved rapidly to curb the disease before it spread to the Indians of their region. Tragically, their attempt to prevent an epidemic inadvertently produced a virulent center for the disease, spreading smallpox to the northern tribes.

Chardon first recorded the outbreak of smallpox in the villages near Fort Clark on July 14, noting a "young Mandan died today of the Small Pox – several others has [sic] caught it." But the trader believed the Indians would be spared an epidemic since most were out on the prairie procuring meat and hides. Indeed, the gradual spread of the disease within the village probably was slowed by the fact that those Indians remaining near the post were mostly elderly men and women who may have acquired immunity through exposure to the epidemic of 1801-02. Unfortunately, some of the Indians had been infected prior to the decampment, for when they returned to the villages, they came in with smallpox.[9]

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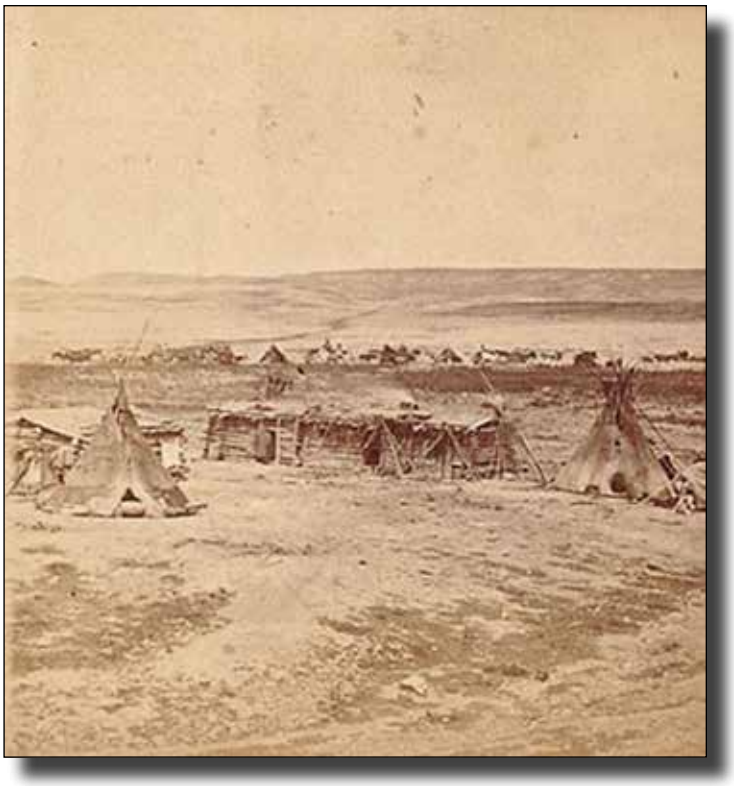
Between July 14 and August 7, Chardon observed the rapid advance of the disease through the villages as more hunting bands returned to the post. Yet it was not until August 8, when he estimated that two-thirds of the Mandans were sick, that he began to administer Epsom salt to the victims. Magnesium sulphate may have been useful in reducing inflammation, but it could do nothing to check the deadly disease which was killing a dozen or more each day. By August 11, Chardon gave up counting the dead: "I Keep no a/c of the dead, as they die so fast that it is impossible."[10]

August was a particularly dangerous month for the traders of Fort Clark. The Indians were quick to connect the coming of the *St. Peter* with the outbreak of smallpox and Indian-trader relations were strained to the breaking point. Having survived an assassination attempt and several threats to kill all the whites at the post, the chief trader understandably felt "beset by enemies on all sides." With Indians "dying off 8 and 10 every day" and Indian-trader hostility mounting, Chardon found it "impossible to Know Friend or Enemie" as "an Indian soon turned, like the wind, from one side to the other." In this tense situation defense of the post was the chief trader's first responsibility, and Chardon readied the fort's weapons and powder, dryly anticipating the time "when the fun commences." As an added precaution guards were stationed around the post after the traders heard rumors the Indians intended "to fire the Fort."[11]

But despite the ravages of the epidemic, the post was in no position to fight off an Indian attack. Consequently, Chardon undertook a policy of mollifying the Indians through gifts. On August 11, he sent trader Toussaint Charbonneau to the nearby hunting camp of a small band of Gros Ventres "with some tobacco, and a bag full of good talk, as yesterday they sent a very severe threat to me." This band had come south the previous spring to hunt with their relatives, the Arikaras, and were among the smallpox victims. Chardon was even more fearful of the main body of Gros Ventres still camped far to the north. On August 19, he sent Charbonneau and his Gros Ventre woman with "ten Pounds of tobacco to the Soldiers of the Gros Ventres" to warn the Indians not to come to their summer camp near the post "as the disease has not yet broke out among them ." Surprisingly, Chardon concluded this same journal entry with the note "the disease broke out in the Fort six days ago." Even more surprising is the fact that the day before, on August 18, the chief trader had learned from a returning Arikara that the "Soldiers" of the principal Gros Ventre village had "made a quarantine" and "would permit no one from this place [i.e. Fort Clark] to come near them."[12]

Though it seems probable the Gros Ventres would have contracted smallpox through contact with other plains bands



Larpenteur Trading Post

already infected with the disease Chardon's own emissary may have spread the disease to this northern tribe. On September 9, Charbonneau returned to Fort Clark, relating "all well in that quarter, the disease has not yet broke out among them, except his squaw, who died 4 days ago." Three days after Charbonneau's return, however, an Arikara who had resided with the Gros Ventres returned to the post with news that smallpox had erupted at their camp.[13] Smallpox has an incubation period of approximately twelve days during which the disease is neither observable nor communicable. Incubation is followed by three or four days of fever. During this stage red spots appear on the torso and the victim becomes infectious. The fever then subsides for a day before the disease erupts into pustules covering the entire body. The entire cycle from infection to death or initial recovery takes twenty to twenty-two days. [14] Had Charbonneau's woman been infected with smallpox shortly before the trip north on August 19, she would have arrived at the Gros Ventre village prior to the infectious, observable stage of the disease. Moreever, given the pathology of smallpox, Charbonneau would have left the village just as the Indians entered its febrile stage. Whether or not the trader's woman introduced smallpox to the Gros Ventres, it is unlikely they could have escaped the epidemic, for within days of the news of smallpox at the main Gros Ventre camp, messengers from Fort Union arrived to inform Chardon the disease was among the more northern Assiniboin and Blackfoot. By the end of September the Indians had received

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staggering losses. Among the Mandans and Arikaras, Chardon estimated "seven eights of the Mandans and one half of the Rees Nations" had perished in the epidemic.[15]

Throughout the smallpox ordeal Chardon remained little more than an observer of the Indian tragedy, being prompted only occasionally to intervene through the liberal use of tobacco and "good talk " to calm hostility toward the traders. Indeed, at times he took a callous view of the demise of the Indians. In mid-September Chardon was visited by a Mandan youth who informed the trader that in his village "the Number of deaths Cannot be less than 800." Chardon's journal reply was succinct: "What a bande of RASCALS has been used up." When he received news at the end of August that a combined Gros Ventre-Arikara war party had been destroyed by the Sioux, the trader retorted it was "quicker work than the smallpox."[16]


Portrait of Charles Larpenteur

Such comments strike the modern reader as inhumane, but they illustrate the harshness of the world of the fur trade of the 1830's. Without vaccine Chardon could do little to stem the epidemic raging in the Indian villages. Moreover, by the end of August smallpox was taking its toll among the trading post families and by mid-September Chardon could bitterly complain he had "but two Men able to Work, the rest are sick a bed." In the face of this disaster Chardon resigned himself to the notion that "the peste is at this place." Indeed, like so many western trappers and traders, Chardon was something of a fatalist. No effort had been made to prevent contact between Fort Clark and the infected Indians. The disease had struck without warning and it would have to run its course. In all such disasters, Indian and trader alike would have to live or die on the upper Missouri "as fate may direct."[17]

Unlike Chardon at Fort Clark, the American Fur Company agents at Fort Union were immediately aware of the presence of smallpox in its pustular stage. Two first-hand accounts remain of the actions taken by the traders of Fort Union in confronting the disease. One account comes from Jacob Halsey, the newly appointed chief agent, who filed a brief "Report on small-pox epidemic" with the Company in November 1837. The second account is provided by Halsey's subordinate, Charles Larpenteur, whose Fort Union journal formed the basis of his autobiographical *Forty Years a Fur Trader.*[18] Though these accounts differ at crucial points, together they suggest the traders at Fort Union took an active, though ineffective, role in combatting the spread of smallpox on the northern plains.

When the *St. Peter* arrived at Fort Union on June 24, Halsey was recovering from a mild case of smallpox, and the traders' "only apprehensions were that the disease might spread among the lndians." [19] As at Fort Clark, most of the Indians who traded at Fort Union were still out on the plains, though a substantial number of native women and children resided at the post. What occurred during the first weeks after Halsey's arrival is clouded by conflicting reports. Halsey's official report to the Company states only that "fifteen days after I was taken sick" the "detestable pest made its appearance in the fort." Within a matter of days, twenty-seven residents had been infected, four of whom–three Indian women and a Company man–died from the disease.[20]

Larpenteur's account of these weeks differs dramatically. Larpenteur contends that the traders wanted "everything cleaned up before any Indians should come in, on their fall trade." Since no vaccine was available, the traders chose "to inoculate with the smallpox itself."[21] This procedure, known as variolation, had been practiced during the eighteenth century and was erroneously held to produce a weakened form of smallpox in the inoculated individual, thereby producing immunity to the naturally occurring disease. With the success of Jenner's cowpox vaccine at the turn of the century, inoculation with live smallpox matter fell into disuse. Nevertheless, as late as the 1820s, some physicians continued to recommend this dangerous procedure as a last resort in preventing an epidemic.[22] Following a medical manual still advocating this procedure, and extracting the virus from Halsey himself, Larpenteur claims the traders variolated "about 30 Indian squaws and a few white men." The results of this dangerous experiment were catastrophic: "some went crazy, ... others were half eaten up by maggots before they died," and the few that survived "were so much disfigured that one could scarcely recognize them."[23]

Why do the Halsey and Larpenteur accounts differ so greatly and which is to be believed? I am inclined to adhere to the account given by Larpenteur. First, Larpenteur's account was taken from his journal, a private record of the events which did not become known until he used the journal to reconstruct his autobiography in the 1870s. Any repercussions from the manner in which the traders handled the smallpox outbreak would have long faded. Second, even after thirty years, Larpenteur did not deny his responsibility in the events of July 1837. In fact, he erroneously maintained that variolating "proved fatal to most of our patients" only because the smallpox matter was not "taken from a very

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healthy person." [24] Halsey's account, on the other hand, was an official report by the Company's chief agent to his superiors. Halsey realized the *St. Peter* would carry the news of his smallpox case back to Company officials in St. Louis. As Fort Union's newly-appointed agent, he understandably worried he would be held accountable for the strained Indian-trader relations and for the loss in revenue which accompanied the spread of smallpox in the region, a loss Halsey himself acknowledged to be "immense in fact incalculable as our most profitable Indians have died."[25] Perhaps his failure to mention the decision to variolate and his inclusion of low mortality figures within the post were his way of putting the best face on a disastrous situation.

Fort Union Trading Post

What occurred after the outbreak of smallpox within the post is more certain. With Indians arriving daily from their summer hunting, the traders quickly placed a quarantine around Fort Union and refused to admit any Indian to the post. As an additional precaution Halsey sent an interpreter to each band explaining the fort's condition. The decision to quarantine the post and to ward off the incoming Indians must have been a difficult one since the post's isolation would mean the loss of a considerable profit from the Indian trade.[26] That the traders attempted to maintain a strict quarantine is corroborated by a report of William Todd, chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company's Swan River District and Fort Union's principal competitor for the Indian trade of the northern plains. In September 1837, Todd learned from a band of Crees that a "bad disease has got into the American Fort in Consequence of which their gates are kept constantly Shut and no Indian Allowed to enter." [27]

In spite of the quarantine, however, the disease spread from Fort Union as hunting bands continued to visit the post. Halsey believed the quarantine was effective, but blamed a miasmatic condition around the post for spreading smallpox to the incoming Assiniboin since "the air was infected with it for a half mile without the pickets."[28] Larpenteur, on the other hand, implies smallpox spread when a band of Indians refused to leave the post without proof of the disease. To accommodate them, a young boy, "whose face was still one solid scab," was hoisted above the stockade. Days later, the post learned over half of this band had succumbed to smallpox. [29] While there is no reason to doubt the veracity of Larpenteur's story, it is highly unlikely the band contracted smallpox at the fort. Given the disease's infectious cycle, the Indians must have had the virus before coming to the post, perhaps becoming infected through earlier contact with other bands turned away by the quarantine. Indeed, with the post containing infected corpses, clothing and human waste, Fort Union would have been a virulent center of contagion. It would have been most improbable had the bands coming to the post escaped contact with the disease entirely.

By August, smallpox was well established on the northern plains around Fort Union. The traders, having weathered the disease within the post, did what they could to attend the infected natives who continued to arrive demanding one last "frolic till the end." To accommodate them, the traders converted the abandoned buildings of nearby Fort William into "hospitals for Indians" where the sick were attended by native women. [30] Yet without vaccine to immunize the uninfected the disease could not be slowed, and Halsey hurriedly sent off his Company report with the urgent plea, "Pray send some Vaccine matter."[31] But no vaccine was forthcoming, and by the spring of 1838, Larpenteur estimated that half of the Assiniboin tribe–perhaps 4,000 in all–succumbed to smallpox.[32]

Smallpox finally subsided on the northern plains with the coming of spring, though not before the Indians of the upper Missouri had suffered severe losses. The best available evidence indicates as many as 20,000 died during the epidemic, thus placing the mortality rate at a staggering 38% among the upper Missouri tribes.[33] Unquestionably, the presence of vaccine would have reduced mortality significantly. To the south, where the United States government belatedly provided vaccine and a physican to the Sioux camped near the Sioux Agency and Fort Pierre, the mortality rate among the Yankton and Dakota fell to 11%, well below the near 40% suffered by the upper Missouri tribes.[34] To the Canadian north, the use of vaccine also reduced fatalities among the natives. The epidemic had been carried to the Canadian plains by fleeing Indians. Fortunately, the Hudson's Bay Company quickly made vaccine available to its factors and many Company men vaccinated the lndiaas even before they confirmed the disease on the upper Missouri was smallpox. This prompt action reduced mortality among the plains tribes, while providing a buffer which prevented smallpox spreading to the Woodlands Indians and allowed the disease to burn out in the north.[35]

On the upper Missouri, the Indians had to rely on themselves and on the agents of the American Fur Company in fighting

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the smallpox epidemic. The response of the traders of Fort Clark and Fort Union indicates that when modern methods were unavailable or failed them, they fell back on traditional methods and notions regarding contagious disease. The traders were well aware that the best method of halting the spread of smallpox was through vaccination. Indeed, it was with the realization that vaccine was unavailable that the traders at Fort Union chose the alternative of inoculating with smallpox itself. Though variolating was a dangerous practice, their intention was to adopt "prompt measures ... to prevent an epidimic."[36] When their experiment with variolation spread the disease, Halsey and Larpenteur turned to more traditional methods of fighting contagion– quarantine and isolated facilities for the sick. Though these methods could do little to stem the epidemic, their adoption suggests that the Fort Union traders saw their role as more than mere Company brokers for the Indian trade. For the Fort Union traders, the role of the fur trader included responsibility for the welfare of the Indians even in the midst of disaster.

Chardon's actions at Fort Clark, on the other hand, indicate he held no such larger view of the trader's role. As chief trader his role was to protect the post and Company families until the disease subsided and trader-Indian relations returned to normal. The Indians, like the traders at the post, would have to take care of themselves. Yet Chardon's response to the catastrophe destroying the nearby Indians was not malevolent. Rather, his resignation to the spread of smallpox among the Indians was itself a sign of a traditional, fatalistic view of man's relationship to contagious disease. Without vaccine, the epidemic could not be fought, it had to be endured.

From a contemporary vantage point, it would be easy to find fault with the responses of the traders to the smallpox epidemic of 1837-38. The decision to variolate the Indians at Fort Union, given hindsight, was a grave mistake. Chardon's decision to send a family already exposed to smallpox to a quarantined location can only be condemned. But in fairness, the traders of Fort Clark and Fort Union responded in ways characteristic of the time and setting. More disturbing is the failure of the American Fur Company and the United States government to provide smallpox vaccine to a people whose susceptibility to the virus was well known. Some have argued, correctly, that Native Americans resisted vaccination, yet evidence indicates just as many welcomed vaccination. Clearly, the success of the Hudson's Bay Company's vaccination program in 1837 was aided by Indians who learned the procedure and spread the practice themselves.[37] What is important is that while the etiology of smallpox remained unknown in 1837, the preventive was at hand, and the demise of the upper Missouri tribes during the epidemic of 1837-38 might have been prevented.

Notes:

1. Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade and the Far West*, 2 vols. (New York: Press of the Pioneers, 1935), II: 613. Clyde D. Dollar, "The high plains smallpox epidemic of 1837-38," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 8 (January 1977), 15. Arthur J. Ray, "Diffusion of diseases in the western interior of Canada, 1830-1850," *Geographical Review*, 66 (April 1976), 154. Esther W. and Allen E. Stearn, *The Effects of Smallpox on the Destiny of the Amerindian* (Boston: Bruce Humphries, 1945), 92-93. Stearn and Stearn have compiled primary source data on mortality estimates for the epidemic of 1837-38 and compared them with estimates of tribal populations in 1836. If we take into account only those upper Missouri tribes with a principal residency within the continental United States, a mortality rate of 38.5% can be assigned to the epidemic. See: Stearn, *Effect of Smallpox,* 94.
2. Stearn, *Effect of Smallpox,* 73-79.
3. Joel N. Shurkin, *The Invisible Fire: the Story of Mankind's Victory Over the Ancient Scourge of Smallpox* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1979), 181-212. Stearn, *Effect of Smallpox*, 56-57, 61-62 .
4. Reprinted in: Stearn, *Effect of Smallpox*, 62-63.
5. *Ibid.*, 64.
6. T. Hartley Crawford to J.R. Poinsett, 14 December 1838; United States Congress, House of Representatives, Document No. 51, published in: *New American State Papers*, "Indian Affairs," Ill: 126-127.
7. Roger L. Nichols, "The Arikara Indians and the Missouri River trade: a quest for survival," *Great Plains Quarterly,* 2 (Spring 1982), 77, 88, 91. John E. Sunder, Joshua Pilcher, Fur Trader and Indian Agent (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1968), 84-85.
8. Dollar, "High plains smallpox epidemic," 18-22.
9. Francis A. Chardon, *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1838*, edited by Annie H. Abel (Pierre: Department of History, State of South Dakota, 1932), 121-123.
10. *Ibid.,* 126.
11. *Ibid.,* 123, 128, 130-131.
12. *Ibid.,* 126, 129-130.
13. *Ibid.,* 135-136.
14. *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, 26th ed. (Philadelphia : W.B. Saunders, 1981), 1213. Paul D. Hoeprich, editor, *Infectious Diseases* (Hagerstown, MD: Harper and Row, 1972) 815-817.
15. Chardon, Journal, 136-138. David J. Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840; a Geographical Synthesis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 101.
16. Chardon, *Journal*, 126-127, 137.

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17. *Ibid.*, 133, 135, 137.
18. Jacob Halsey, "Report on small-pox epidemic," published as Appendix H, in: *Chardon, Journa*l, 394-396. Charles Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1933).
19. Larpenteur, *Forty Years,* 109. See also: Halsey, "Report on small-pox," 394.
20. Halsey, "Report on small-pox," 394.
21. Larpenteur, *Forty Years*, 109.
22. Dorland's Medical Dictionary, 1437. George Rosen, *A History of Public Health* (New York: MD Publications, 1976 c1958), 185.
23. Larpenteur, *Forty Years*, 109-110.
24. *Ibid.,* xix, 110.
25. Halsey, "Report on small-pox," 394-395.
26. *Ibid*., 394.
27. Quoted in: Arthur J. Ray, "Smallpox: the epidemic of 1837-38," *The Beaver, Magazine of the North* (Autumn 1975), 9.
28. Halsey, "Report on small-pox," 394.
29. Larpenteur, *Forty Years*, 110-111.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Halsey, "Report on small-pox," 396.
32. Larpenteur, *Forty Years,* 111.
33. Stearn, Effect of Smallpox, 94.
34. *Ibid.* Sunder, Joshua Pilcher, 137-139.
35. Ray, "Diffusion of diseases," 156. Ray, "Smallpox," 9-11, 13.
36. Larpenteur, *Forty Years*, 109.
37. Ray, "Smallpox," 10-11.

Upcoming Events

**Fort Atkinson State Historical Park
north of Omaha, Nebraska is hosting the
*2020 National Fur Trade Symposium***

**POSTPONED UNTIL
September 8-11, 2021**

Call for Papers!
The primary focus of the 2020 National Fur Trade Symposium is that era of trade on the Missouri River spanning from the return of Lewis and Clark in 1806 to the abandonment of Fort Atkinson in 1827. Papers pertaining to notable individuals and/or companies and particular events occurring during that time-period are encouraged. Papers pertaining to the impact of the U.S. Army and the implementation of federal law on the fur trade and the Missouri River native tribes are encouraged, as well.

**Email a copy of your paper to jason.grof @nebraska.gov
or mail a hard copy to Fort Atkinson SHP, PO Box 240, Ft. Calhoun, NE 68023**

An Interesting Reference to the Upper Missouri Smallpox Epidemic of 1837

Credit: Museum of the Fur Trade, Volume 47, No. 1

Bernard Pratt Jr. was heir to the Pratte family portion of the Pratte Chouteau and Co. fur business, and he was also a steamboat pilot. He was in command of the vessel, the *St. Peter's* that carried smallpox up the Missouri to Forts Clark and Union, causing emmense personal destruction among the tribes there, and eventually infecting and killing Indians across the Canadian and American plains.

The American Fur Company Steamboat named *Yellowstone* on the Missouri River

A letter in the museum's collection from Pratte to his cousin, Pierre Chouteau Jr., indicates that smallpox had already broken out and was in full contagion when the boat was stalled by low water on the middle Missouri six weeks before the disease killed its first Indian victim at Fort Clark.

The *St. Peter's* left St. Louis about April 17, 1837, carrying tow Indian agents and government annuity goods plus supplies andtrade goods for the fur company posts. Reaching Fort Leavenworth on April 29, there was a "mulatto" crew member sick with fever. However the illness was not recognized as smallpox until the agency for the Omahas, Otoes, and pawnees at the Council Bluff had been reached. By then, several more crew members were ill. Three Arikara women took passage there for the Upper Missouri.

Mandan Woman

The letter was written from the mouth of the Niobrara River two weeks later as the boat waited for the rise of the water. Pratte reported that one death had already occurred.It was carried to St. Louis by Narcisse Leclere, and independent trader that was apparently in the employ of Mr. Cabanne, who was decending the Missouri with his winter's returns.

The boat reached the Yankton and Santee Sioux agency below Fort Pierre on June 5 and agent Joshua Pilcher, who disembarked there, wrote that the disease was in full force by the end of the month and the Indians were scattering across the prairies. On June 19 the *St. Peter's* docked at Fort Clark, where the three Arikara women disembarked. On June 24 the boat arrived at Fort Union, dropping off infected passengers including fur trader Jacob Halsey. On July 14 the first Indian died at Fort Clark. Because Francis Cardon did not mention the presence of smallpox, the assumption has been made the the three Arikara women ere the vectors who carried the disease to the Arikara, Mandan and Hidatsa. However, Pratte's letter does not mention the three women but does state the the illness was rampant among the crew.

Before the disease ran its course, ten out of the twelve Indians living around Fort Union were dead. It killed at least 700 Blackfeet, 800 Assiniboines, 2,500 Pawnees, and an unkown number of Lakota, Dakota, Nakota and Canadian Indians.

Running Water [Mouth of the Niobrara]
May 29, 1837

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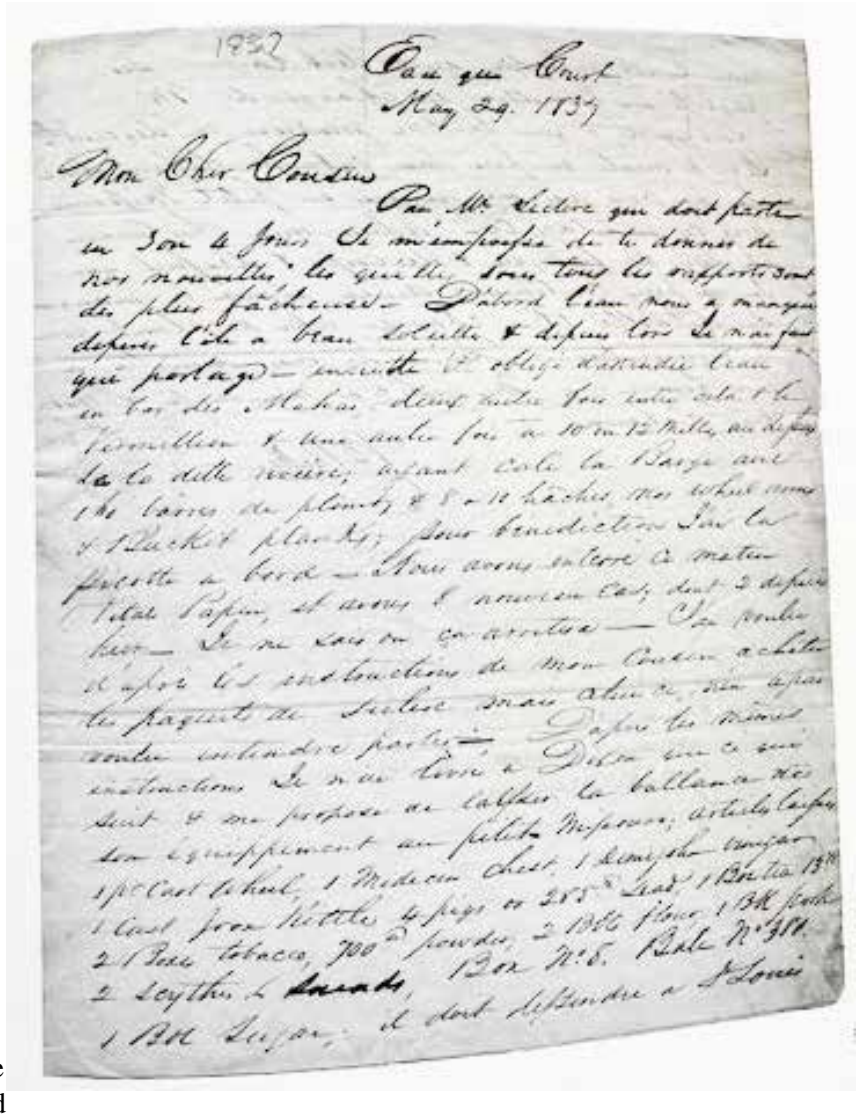


My Dear Cousin:
By Mr. [Narcisse] Leclere who should be leaving in 3 or 4 days I make myself miserable by giving you the news which are by all reports the most distressing. To start with, the water left us at Beausoleil Island and since then I have done nothing but portage. Then I was obliged to wait for the water at the Omahas, two other times between there and the Vermillion [River] and one other time at 10 or 12 miles above that river, having grounded the Barge with 160 bars of lead, and 8 or 10 axes, our wheel arms and Bucket planks [parts for steamboat paddle wheels].

As an added blessing I have smallpox on board. We buried this morning Vital Papin, and have 8 new cases, two since yesterday. I do not know where this will end.

I wanted to follow my cousin's instructions to buy the [fur] packs of Mr. Leclere but that's not something he wanted to do. Following the same instructions I did not deliver Mr. Dixon his goods and I plan to leave the balance of the oufit at the Little missouri; articles to be left include 1 pr. Cart wheels, 1 Medicine chest, 1 demijohn of vinegar, 1 cast iron kettle, 4 pigs or 285 lbs. of lead, 1 box of tea 13#, 2 Boxes tobacco, 700 lbs. powder, 2 Bbls flour, 1 Bbl Pork, 2 scythes & snaths, Box No. 8, Bale No. 380, 1 Box Sugar. He should be going down to St. Louis but he intended to leave the packs at the Vermillion in charge of Mr. Labruyere, and that I will pick them up whe I go down.

The water came up a little, but has fallen since dinner. I do not believe I will be able to make it to the Little MIssouri with this set-up.

Adieu, my dear cousin. I am so exhausted in body and spirit that I cannot continue, so excuse my lack of detail, etc. I will have enough lead for the annuities. Give my news to my wife. My respects to my uncle Labbadie and Mr. Cabanne.

B. Pratte

Outside of the envelope is addresssed:
Messrs. Pratte Chouteau & Co.
St. Louis
Politeness of
Mr. Leclere

On the back of the envelope is written:
Bernard Pratte
Running Water May 29, 1837
Received [in St. Louis] July 1, 1837

President/Editor's Comments - Kevin Kucera

Kevin Kucera
President/Editor

In these uncertain times of a global pandemic, we look to history and see it repeat itself. In the feature article by David Ferch we can see how in 1837-1838 a novel virus to the Northern Plains Indians nearly wiped them out. It has to be one of the greatest tragedies in American history. And yet we find ourselves in 2020 repeating the same medical business and government blunders of the past. Like always the great American spirit will save the day, and we sure see that in those individuals who are stepping up in hospitals, medical labs, and elderly care facilities. During this American smallpox epidemic of long ago people did step up to help like the fur traders who converted Ft. William into an Indian Hospital, and the HBC with their Indian smallpox vaccination program. It was shown at the Sioux Agency and Ft. Pierre that with one Doctor implementing a vaccination system they were able to reduce the mortality rate to 11%.

Under the direction of Milton von Damm we have completed research assisted by David Malaher, Ft. Vancouver, on sourcing Jedediah Smith records in the Hudson Bay Company Archives files. Unfortunately no new information was found, although team member Kenton Storey, HBCA, did make progress. For example, Kenton found the file for the letter and map of prime Northern California trapping grounds that J.S. Smith made during the winter of 1828-1829 at Fort Vancouver for the future Father of Oregon, Jon McLoughlin, HBC. Smith apparently did this as quid pro quo for the HBC saving his hide and rescuing his bounty left on the banks of the Umpqua River. As you may guess, the letter was in the file, but of course, the Smith Manuscript Map was not in the file.

In the spirit of Manifest Destiny, I trust Jedediah in his bold foreign relations manner, told the British at Fort Vancouver that we Americans were coming to the disputed Oregon Territory like herds of ants in wagons crossing the continental divide at the navigable South Pass. Jedediah Smith and William Ashley in-part commercially plotted the Oregon Trail in 1825-1826 and their trails closely align with the Oregon Trail through Kansas and Nebraska. A transactional record for this journey is in the respective William Ashley field journal which is located at The Campbell House Museum, Saint Louis. The bad weather bogged them down and forced them to stop on the Republican River. So Jedediah Smith, Robert Campbell and company chose to stay in the temporarily abandoned Pawnee Village on the border of Kansas and Nebraska. It so happened that the Pawnee were gone on a hunting trip, and Campbell and Smith chose to stay in the Chief's Lodge. That took some guts being the Pawnee were still practicing human sacrifice! The story of this amazing experience is currently lost with the missing Jedediah Smith journals.

At this time Milton von Damm is leading a team that is compiling an extensive Jedediah Strong Smith Bibliography which will be produced in both printed and electronic versions. The team includes: Joe Green, Jim Hardee, Joe Molter, Richard Saunders, and Irene Steiner. This important project will create a unprecedented research tool for all those interested in our namesake, Jedediah Strong Smith.

It is the hope of the Jedediah Smith Board of Directors that you and yours stay well and safe; and our collective compassion and positive thoughts go out to all people on this planet that are impacted by this global pandemic.

Kevin Kucera
Duck Lake, Indiana
April, 2020

Castor Canadensis Newsletter Guidelines

The editor welcomes articles for publication.
Please review the following guidelines:

1. Prospective authors should send their articles or questions to Kevin Kucera at kckucera@msn.com
2. Submit in MS Word.
3. End notes should be numbered consecutively.
4. Photographs, maps or illustrations should be sent as an attachment and not embedded into the article. They should also be numbered i.e. Fig 1. A separate list with Fig. No. should be attached with a short title of the photograph etc.
5. After receipt the article will be reviewed by a technical editor. Once this is completed the author will be notified and an approximate date for publication will be provided.
6. Please note the *Castor Canadensis* is not responsible for either the research or the opinions of the writer.

Archives Corner

Gibbs, George
1855 Letter of April 25 to John Lambert. Entry 725, RG 48,
Records of the Office of the Secretary of Interior, National Archives, Washington, DC.

[Typescript prepared by Stephen Dow Beckham. Bracketed material inserted by Beckham.]

Steilacoom April 25th 1855

My Dear Sir

Looking over the volume of Railroad Reports the other day at Olympia, it occurred to me to drop you a line to "mamook close tumtum" as well as to talk over the subject. The Reports precisely are a great deal better printed than I expected, I mean so far as spelling is concerned. There are however a few blunders in English as with Indian. I corrected these in [Isaac I.] Stevens' copy, hoping that he would send it back, but he will not I fear yet another in season & he proposes to take that with him. I presume the general correctness is due to your care. If you find time will you correct the following in my Indian report before the publication of the extra copies. Speaking of King George's (the Clallam Indian's) sister, I spoke of her as the dowager and not the daughter of Flattery Jack. I spoke of the language of the ~~Lummis~~ language of the Lummi Indians as a hybrid between the Skagit & the Cowitchin. Some other word, I forget what it is substituted. Speaking of the household utensils of the Klikatats, I used the expression "imported" instead of "important" substitutes. In my report on Shoalwater Bay & P[uget] S [ound. Speaking of the Nisqually, it reads "a somewhat large river." alter to "a considerable river". In Stevens' letter to [Abiel W .] Tinkham he directs him to return from the Snoqualmoo pass by railroad; alter to trail. The railroad is not quite finished. In, I think. Tinkham's report, Father Pandonly, should be Pandosy, two or three times. In my Geol[ogical] report for Chegnoss, read Chequoss. There are others that I dont remember. Capt. [George B.] McC[lellan] if in Washington could correct them. Your report I liked very much, but taking the bulk of the thing together & particularly including my own I dont think the concern up to what it should be. I mean the papers generally are not first class, though there is much valuable information ~~included~~ in them all.

There is one thing I should be glad to have you mention to Capt. [A. A.] Humphreys. I am not acquainted with him myself. I understand that he is constructing a map, having on it all the actual routes surveyed by expeditions. When accompanying the Indian Agent, [Redick] McKee in California in 1851, I made a survey of the country up the coast from Sonoma to Humboldt bay, then to the Klamath & up that river to Shaste valley where I connected with Lieut. [Robert S.] Williamson's route from Oregon to San Francisco. The original is in the Indian Bureau. [Henry R.] Schoolcraft knows where. It is the only actual reconnaissance of that portion of the country that has ever been made & corrects the errors prevalent as to the course of the Klamath river. Although it was my first attempt at Surveying or topography, it is generally accurate, Williamson having assisted me in reducing it, on my return to Benicia. The map has never been published, and I should be glad to see it included in the general map I spoke of, if within its purview. The joint Commission of army & navy officers when in Oregon in 1850 purchased the original Mss map of Jedediah Smith, the fur trader, which up to a late period furnished most of the information respecting the interior of Oregon & California. Wilkes used it. That is I presume in Washington. Major Smith of the Engineers I think bought it. It is curious as showing the enormous extent of country he traveled over anticipating by some 15 years [John C.] Fremonts circuit of and crossing the Basin of California. The general features too are very correct except as to longitude. The map was prepared in 1831 under direction of Gen. [William H.] Ashley by Chas. ~~DeWard~~ De Ward, draughtsman. A notice of it you will find by Mr. [Albert] Gallatin in the 1st vol. NY Ethnological Society's Transactions, Introduction, p. xxxviii and also in my Journal of McKee's exploration, published in Schoolcraft's work. His death is mentioned (I mean [Jedediah] Smith's) in [Josiah] Gregg's "commerce of the prairies" & by a somewhat strange coincidence Gregg's death in my Journal. Gregg was the discoverer of Humboldt bay & the first explorer of the country I traveled over. I mention all this because as you are deep in the bowels of the continent, it may by chance be of service.

Continued on page 12

Archives Corner

Gibbs, George
1855 Letter of April 25 to John Lambert. ***(Continued)***

I am living on my [Donation Land] claim about 5 miles from the town of Steilacoom & have turned farmer. In the midst of the last paragraph I had to stop, rush out of the house, gun in hand and kill, not an Indian, but a skunk that was troubling my hen roost. D--n him he just got the last of a brood of chickens before he got my shot. I hope this letter wont smell as strong when it reaches you as I do now. During the winter I have been employed by [Isaac I.] Stevens as Surveyor to the Indian Commission to lay off the reserves &c. I am now preparing a map & final report on the Pugets Sound district, final I mean for me. This map will contain some new information about the coast country when done which however will not be I fear till too late for you. I expect to go down the coast from Cape Flattery to ~~the~~ Grays Harbor & examine the country & rivers, particularly the Quinaiult, which we have ascertained heads in a lake which it takes the Indians half a day to cross in Canoes. This lake is near as I can judge lies N. W. from the head of Hoods Canal. Gov. Stevens wrote you calling your attention to Lieut. [Richard] Arnold's map of the Military Road from Steilacoom to Walla Walla. In case his letter missed you, I mention it, as important. It went to the Sec[retar]y of War.

The territory is all agog with politics. The two Conventions meet in May to elect a delegate. Candidates on Dem[ocrat] Side [Isaac N.] Ebey, [Isaac I.] Stevens, [Columbia] Lancaster, [T. Patton] Anderson, [Edward] Lander (nowhere) [O. B.] McFadden &c. &c. on Whig side [Gilmore] Hayes [Hays], [William] Strong, [William H.] Wallace, [A. A.] Denny. By all appearance it will be a close fight & we shant know who is governor till after the election, especially as the Know nothings or "Clonass" party are alive here, it is said. Our late delegate will probably fight on the persecution principle & in case he is not elected, make a mess in the Camp. So much for politics. The territory is growing slowing but steadily. Olympia has improved a good deal. When we get our Mail Steamer, we expect to go ahead.

Whenever you can drop me a map or a topographical document, do so. I would like to see Fred Lander's publications.

And So, goodnight

George Gibbs

If you know Schoolcraft, tell him that I am throwing an enormous file of disjecta membra into my Indian report & that Stevens intends to turn it over <u>the whole</u> to him, to swallow whole or make a soup of as he pleases. I have also a separate article for his book. Give my best regards to him.

John Lambert, Esq.

Map of the United States by David H. Burr, 1839. This rare map shows many features taken directly from the J.S. Smith Manuscript Map. On this map Jedediah Smith named the Sierra Mountains "Mount Joseph", and the peak at the north end of the Sierras is named "Rogers Peak". Smith named Mount Joseph after his friend, Fr. Joseph Sanchez, Catholic Priest, San Gabriel Mission. Rogers Peak was named after his friend and partner, Harrison Rogers, who was killed by the Kelawaset Indians on the Umpqua River in 1828.

Continued on page 13

Archives Corner

Gibbs, George
1855 Letter of April 25 to John Lambert. ***(Continued)***

George Gibbs 1855 Letter Notes

Not long ago at the editor's request Dr. Stephen Beckham revisited George Gibbs and the missing Jedediah Smith Manuscript Map. In earlier years at UCLA Dr. Beckham did his PhD Thesis on George Gibbs. While in possession of the Smith Manuscript Map, Gibbs copied information on the Smith Map and put it on an 1849 Fremont "49er" Map which is now located at the American Geographical Society, Milwaukee, WI.

In the process of revisiting the missing J.S. Smith Map, Dr. Beckham found the herein 1855 Gibbs letter to John Lambert in which he discusses the Smith Map. The details of this letter are fascinating and affirm many people's position that the Smith Map was the gold standard map of the west and often copied as described in the Gibbs letter. The information in this letter helps our efforts in the search for the missing Smith Manuscript Map.

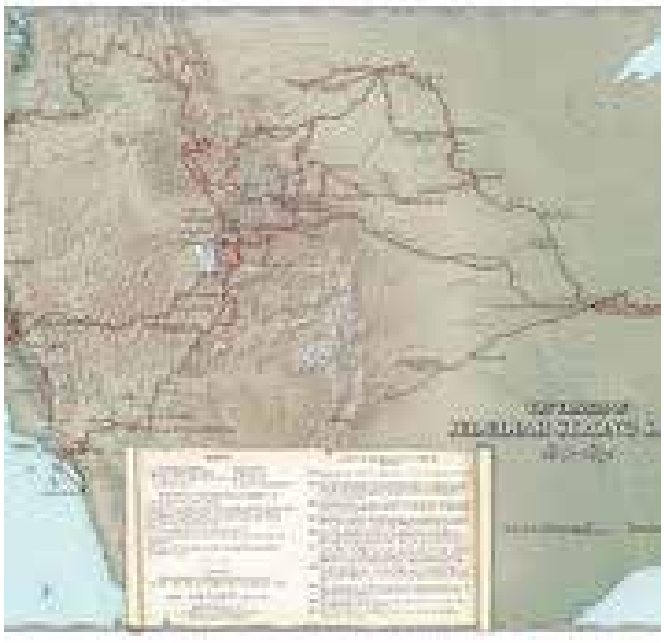
Gibbs mentions that Smith's map was quite accurate. He said: "The general features too are very correct except as to longitude." Being off on longitude (east – west) was a common issue and challenge for map makers at this time. To accurately determine longitude a rare and fickle clock chronometer was needed, and, this technology was newly developed by John Harrison. The clock chronometer technology was being refined as late as 1865.

The Jedediah Smith Society is most thankful to Dr. Beckham and his wonderful work which has in turn advanced our efforts in the search for the missing manuscript maps of Jedediah Smith.

Please remember to go to our website:
www.JedediahSmithSociety.org
to check out the interactive maps that have been created by our map team.
They're unbelievable!

Also please consider purchasing a map for your wall.

They come in 2 sizes:
24" x 36"
and 16" x 20".
You may order the historic style or one with modern highways added. You will find the order sheet on-line with instructions.



Members' Section

New Members

Please welcome our new members to the Society. We welcome you to our events and participation on various committees. If you'd like to write an article please see the guidelines under the editor column.

No new members this quarter.

Donor List

The Society wishes to thank the sponsors and patrons and all members for the investment in the future of our society.

Special thanks to:

- Theresa Melbar donated $1,000 to our Society to help fund a replacement of a Jedediah Smith monument near Bakersfield that was stolen. The Bakersfield Historical Society has the lead in this project.
- The James Irvine Foundation has awarded a grant of $500 to the Jedediah Smith Society to help pay for the costs associated with having Professor Stephen Beckham speak at the 2019 Annual Meeting. This grant came from the Staff Discretionary Grants Program through Adam Cimino. His father is Rich Cimino, a member of our Board.
- Jim Smith donated $150 to help pay for printing expenses associated with the Annual Meeting.
- Member Jon Warn made a general donation of $100 over and above his dues which will be used to help fund the map project.
- New member, Kenneth Rendell made a general donation of $100 when paying his initial dues making him a JSS Patron.

Thank you!

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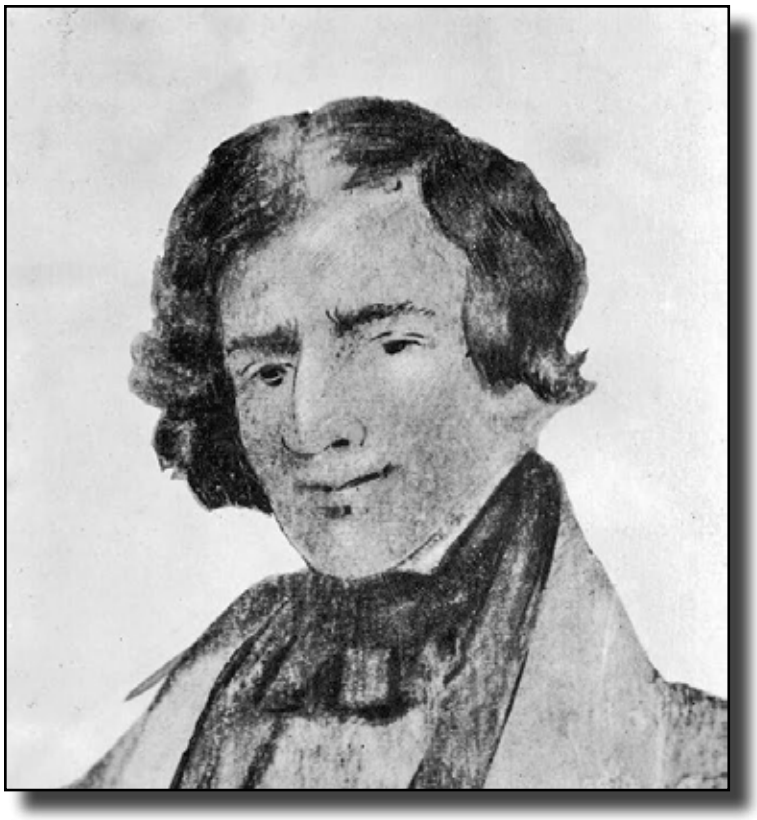

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