

FRANCIS PARKMAN



THE OREGON TRAIL

Francis Parkman

The Oregon Trail

Enriched edition. Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Evan Kelley

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Introduction

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Threaded through the low swales and high sky of the Great Plains, the long brown road of the continent becomes a testing ground where curiosity, ambition, and endurance meet wind, dust, and distance, and where the imagined West, shimmering beyond the next rise, is exchanged for the felt realities of hooves, river crossings, hunger, storm light, and human encounter, in a journey that measures a nation's desires against the stubborn facts of land and culture.

The Oregon Trail, by Francis Parkman, is a landmark of American travel writing first published in book form in 1849. It arises from Parkman's overland journey of 1846 from the Missouri frontier toward the Rocky Mountains, where a young New Englander follows the emigrant road, rides with hunters and traders, and visits frontier posts such as Fort Laramie. The book's premise is simple yet inexhaustible: to observe and record the people, landscapes, hardships, and improvisations of the trail at close range, transforming movement itself into narrative while withholding any outcome beyond the open horizon that draws the traveler on.

Parkman undertook this expedition in his early twenties, and its immediacy shapes the prose. Portions of the narrative first appeared serially in 1847 in Knickerbocker's Magazine under the title The California and Oregon Trail before being gathered and refined for the 1849 volume. The author would later gain renown as a historian for France and England in North America, but here he writes as a participant-observer, coupling youthful vigor with a disciplined eye. The result is a

record both of a particular year on the Plains and of a mind learning how to see a vast, contested geography.

As narrative art, *The Oregon Trail* uses the travel chronicle to frame a series of scenes, portraits, and meditations. It is organized by the natural cadences of movement—day's march, camp, storm, repair—and by the encounters that punctuate them. Parkman blends reportage with reflective set pieces and the descriptive reach of landscape writing. Rather than a continuous diary, the book advances through crafted episodes that together create a mosaic of the overland experience: the press of miles, the economy of supplies, the etiquette of trail companionship, and the improvisations demanded by weather, terrain, and chance.

The book's style gives it enduring life. Parkman's sentences carry the gait of travel, alternating quick notations with broader panoramas that set light, color, and contour before the reader. He is a skillful sketcher of character, from seasoned plainsmen to families in wagon trains, and an equally attentive observer of animals, rivers, and sky. The descriptive energy is grounded in detail—tracks, grasses, storms, tools—and lifted by an alertness to mood. This combination of tactile precision and narrative poise allows the book to remain vivid long after the world it depicts has changed.

At its core, *The Oregon Trail* explores themes that outlast its immediate moment: the pull of migration, the costs and exhilarations of risk, the testing of ideals against circumstance, and the moral complexity of cross-cultural encounter. It maps a space where strangers share provisions and stories, where cooperation and misunderstanding coexist, and where the land itself sets the terms. The narrative registers both the magnetism of possibility and the discipline required to continue, asking what it means to

move through a place that others call home and to tell that passage truly.

The book holds classic status because it combines literary craftsmanship with documentary importance. It preserves one of the most influential roadways in American memory at a time when it was carrying thousands westward, yet it does so through a distinctive voice and careful shaping. Readers return to it for the clarity of its scenes and the tension between myth and reality it constantly calibrates. Its pages have been reprinted in many editions, studied by historians of the West, and appreciated by general readers who find in it both a chronicle and an artful performance.

The Oregon Trail also helped set templates for later writing about the American West. Theodore Roosevelt admired Parkman's vigor and narrative force, and Bernard DeVoto championed and edited Parkman's work, seeing in it a model of lucid historical storytelling. Beyond such explicit praise, Parkman's fusion of firsthand observation, scene-making, and reflective commentary has informed historians, essayists, and travel writers who seek to balance ground-level detail with interpretive reach. The book's influence resides not only in what it describes but in the method by which it turns observation into durable narrative.

Historically, the book stands at a pivotal moment. The 1840s saw intertwined overland routes bearing emigrants toward the Pacific Northwest and California, and Parkman followed part of this network from the Missouri Valley into the Plains and toward the Rockies. The title names a famed corridor rather than a fixed destination, and the narrative stays close to the practicalities of the road—supply, route, weather—while registering the broader context of expansion into lands that were and are the homelands of Native

nations. Its observation is local; its implications stretch across a continent.

Modern readers should approach the book with both appreciation and critique. Parkman's perspective reflects nineteenth-century assumptions, and some portrayals, especially of Indigenous peoples, carry the prejudices and limitations of his time. Many contemporary editions frame these issues with historical notes and contextual essays. Reading the narrative with this awareness allows its documentary value and literary qualities to be recognized alongside its blind spots, encouraging a conversation about how accounts are made, who speaks, and what responsibilities attach to describing others in a moment of upheaval.

For those coming to it for the first time, the book repays attention to pace and texture. Notice how distances are felt in hoofbeats and wheel ruts, how weather dictates decisions, and how conversation by firelight sketches a society on the move. The cast includes emigrants, traders, soldiers, and people of the Plains, and the interplay among them becomes a study in improvisation. Parkman's scenes often begin in concrete observation and open into reflection, inviting the reader to inhabit both the day's work and the ideas that travel alongside it.

The Oregon Trail endures because it speaks to perennial questions—about mobility, encounter, risk, resourcefulness, and the stories we tell about places we cross. In an era still defined by movement and by debates over land, belonging, and representation, Parkman's narrative offers a vital, if imperfect, window onto a formative passage in American life. It remains compelling as literature—precise, vivid, and shaped—and as evidence, asking readers to weigh dream against terrain. That double claim, at once aesthetic and

historical, sustains its relevance and secures its lasting appeal.

Synopsis

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Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*, first published in 1849, is a nonfiction narrative drawn from his 1846 journey across the North American plains and into the Rocky Mountains. Written as a series of sketches, it blends travel reportage, natural description, and cultural observation. Parkman, a young Bostonian, sets out to witness the great overland migration then funneling westward, using the prominent wagon road as his corridor. The book situates readers at the edge of the Missouri frontier and proceeds steadily west, charting places, people, and customs encountered along the way, while registering both the hardships of travel and the allure of an expansive landscape.

The early chapters follow Parkman's departure with a small party that includes the experienced hunter Henry Chatillon. They parallel emigrant caravans pushing their wagons toward distant promises. Camp routines, guard duty, and long days in the saddle shape the rhythm. Parkman records the challenges of route-finding, equipment failures, and uneven trail conditions. The Platte River valley, with its broad, monotonous reaches, provides a setting where weather, grass, and water supplies govern progress. Amid tedious stretches come striking moments—wildlife sightings, sudden storms, and night watches—through which Parkman calibrates his own expectations against the realities of overland travel.

As the journey unfolds, the narrative broadens to include the complex society of the trail. Parkman meets emigrants driven by aspiration, traders who knit together distant markets, and scouts who translate terrain into safe passage.

He depicts hunting expeditions for bison and antelope that provision the camp while exposing the precariousness of relying on the chase. Practicalities—repairing wagons, negotiating river fords, rationing—occupy as much space as scenery, anchoring the book in the tangible mechanics of movement. The repetitive labor of travel becomes a lens for observing character, improvisation, and the informal rules that hold improvised communities together.

A frontier post on the Platte serves as a major waypoint, and Parkman treats it as a social crossroads. He notes the mingling of traders, military personnel, emigrants, and Native delegations, all exchanging news and goods before fanning back into the plains. The post signals a threshold, beyond which trails thin and distances widen. Parkman pays attention to ceremonies, horse trading, and the brokerage of peace and commerce that such hubs attempt to stage. Rest and resupply create a pause in the narrative rhythm, allowing him to register voices and perspectives that give contour to a region in rapid transition.

Parkman then spends time living among an Oglala Lakota camp, an episode central to the book's middle sections. He describes domestic life, mobility patterns, hunting practices, and moments of ritual, while acknowledging his dependence on intermediaries and guides. These pages aim to portray a social order built around the buffalo economy and skilled horsemanship. At the same time, the account carries the limitations and biases of its mid-nineteenth-century author, whose language and judgments reflect his era. The result is an entwined record of curiosity, misunderstanding, and selective insight at a moment of intensifying cross-cultural contact.

Turning from the main wagon road, Parkman and his companions push toward rougher country at the foot of the

Rockies. Trails become less distinct, and the party confronts steeper ascents, colder nights, and the fatigue of sustained exertion. The narrative alternates between practical concerns—finding wood, water, and passable routes—and reflective passages that register the sublimity of mountain vistas. Parkman's intermittent illness heightens the sense of risk and dependence, while Chatillon's fieldcraft becomes ever more essential. Wildlife thins and changes with elevation, underscoring the ecological gradients that structure movement and survival in the high country.

The route then bends southward, away from the Oregon-bound current and toward the Arkansas River, where a prominent trading post anchors another network of exchange. Parkman sketches the different commercial circuits that connect the plains to the Southwest, contrasting them with the emigrant stream he has left behind. On the homeward leg, which overlaps stretches of the Santa Fe Trail, he encounters trappers and freighters whose livelihoods turn on timing, credit, and weather. The tone becomes more retrospective as fatigue accumulates and the narrative begins to consider how a journey's scattered episodes cohere into a larger impression of place.

Across these segments, Parkman develops several intertwined themes: the logistics of mass migration, the economics of the fur and provisions trade, the tactical presence of the U.S. military at strategic nodes, and the sovereignty and adaptability of Native nations negotiating shifting power. His strengths lie in vivid scene-setting and fine-grained detail—animal behavior, camp craft, the look of river bottoms after a storm—set against the march of expansion. Yet the book also bears the imprint of its author's prejudices, requiring readers to weigh observation against assumption and to read its ethnographic passages with historical caution.

Without depending on a single climactic revelation, *The Oregon Trail* accumulates significance as a closely observed snapshot of a pivotal moment in North American history. It offers a durable record of landscapes on the cusp of transformation and of peoples whose trajectories intersected uneasily along the great roads west. The work endures for its narrative energy and descriptive power, even as modern readers reassess its limitations. As a document of movement—of bodies, ideas, and economies—it poses lasting questions about how travel reshapes cultures and environments, ensuring its place in discussions of the American West and its literature.

Historical Context

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Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* is set against the mid-1840s North American West, a region stretching from the Missouri frontier across the Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains and beyond. The institutions shaping this space were overlapping: private fur-trade companies operating forts and posts, Native nations with established territorial claims and mobile economies, and a U.S. polity increasingly committed to continental expansion. Trails converged on river corridors—the Platte, Sweetwater, and Green—while waystations like trading posts and ferries structured travel rhythms. Long-distance wagon migration, seasonal buffalo hunts, and riverine transport by steamboat formed the practical background of daily life that Parkman records and interprets for readers in the East.

Parkman undertook his journey in 1846, traveling from the St. Louis region onto the overland road that emigrants used toward Oregon and California. He followed the Platte and North Platte, visited the private trading post commonly known as Fort Laramie, and spent time with a Lakota (Sioux) village before continuing toward the Rockies. The book, published in 1849 and based on journal notes and earlier periodical writing, presents a firsthand travel narrative rather than a settler's manual. It captures encounters with emigrant caravans, traders, soldiers, and Native communities during a year when competing imperial claims and mass migration transformed the trans-Mississippi West.

The ideology most clearly reflected in the book's world is Manifest Destiny, a term popularized in 1845 to express the belief that U.S. expansion across the continent was justified

and inevitable. The Polk administration pressed for territorial acquisition in both the Pacific Northwest and the Southwest. Parkman's narrative inhabits this expansionist climate, showing emigrant movement and official surveying that presumed a United States stretching to the Pacific. Yet the pages also register friction—logistical obstacles, clashing expectations, and cultural misunderstandings—that complicate any triumphalist view, revealing how the grand doctrine translated into difficult, contested encounters on the ground.

The political status of the Pacific Northwest shifted decisively during Parkman's trip. Since 1818, the United States and Great Britain had accepted "joint occupation" of the Oregon Country. In 1846, the Oregon Treaty fixed the U.S.-British boundary at roughly the 49th parallel west of the Rockies, clearing diplomatic ambiguity for American settlers in the Willamette Valley and beyond. This agreement validated the assumptions of many emigrants Parkman met, who were already moving as if U.S. jurisdiction were assured. The book's scenes of wagon traffic and migrant optimism echo the treaty's effects, even as the terrain, climate, and distance revealed the limits of paper diplomacy.

Overland migration to Oregon had grown since the early 1840s, with family groups starting from Independence, Westport, and St. Joseph in Missouri, following established traces to South Pass. Travellers timed departures to grass growth and river levels, organized companies for mutual aid, and relied on prior trail knowledge recorded in letters and guidebooks. Parkman's narrative, though not a how-to manual, chronicles these rhythms: river crossings, supply scarcities, and disputes over pace. He was a visitor rather than an emigrant, but his portrayal of camp routine and

caravan dynamics provides a snapshot of the civilian logistics that underwrote westward movement.

The Mexican-American War (1846–1848) formed the geopolitical backdrop for much of the overland corridor, especially toward New Mexico and California. Although the Oregon road aimed northwest, military reconnaissance and topographical surveying affected the entire interior West. Reports by U.S. Army engineers and explorers—most notably those of John C. Frémont published in the mid-1840s—circulated widely, shaping expectations with maps and descriptions. Parkman's encounters with soldiers and surveyors point to an emergent federal imprint: charting routes, assessing resources, and extending U.S. visibility into regions where sovereignty and practical control remained uncertain and negotiated.

Another population moving along parts of the same corridor in 1846–1847 was the Latter-day Saints, emigrating from the Midwest to the Great Salt Lake region. Their organized companies, way stations, and subsequent settlements would influence infrastructure along shared segments of the trail. Even where Parkman does not dwell on them, the Mormon migration helps explain the era's churn of traffic, provisioning challenges, and the creation of informal information networks—word-of-mouth updates, road conditions, and notes left at river crossings—that linked otherwise separate journeys into a fluid, continent-spanning exchange.

The fur trade still structured much of the Great Plains economy, though the beaver trade had declined since the 1830s as fashions shifted. By the mid-1840s, bison robes and provisioning emigrants sustained many posts. Fort Laramie (then a private post commonly called by that name), Fort Bridger (established in 1842), and other stations

tied Native producers, traders of mixed ancestry, and Euro-American companies into dense networks. Parkman's stops at such places capture a transitional moment: the older world of mountain men and seasonal trade was giving way to a corridor dominated by settler traffic, military logistics, and territorial governance.

Native nations—among them Lakota (Teton Sioux), Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Pawnee on the central Plains; Shoshone and others nearer South Pass—exercised authority over hunting grounds, river crossings, and the movement of outsiders. Equestrian mobility, a buffalo-centered economy, and sophisticated diplomacy with trading companies and rival nations shaped daily life. Parkman's time with a Lakota village offers ethnographic description of camps, councils, and hunts. Modern readers note that his portrayals also carry nineteenth-century biases: he admires martial skill and hospitality yet interprets through a Boston elite's assumptions, revealing both valuable observation and the era's ethnocentric frames.

U.S. Indian policy framed relations even where formal treaties had not yet reached specific locales Parkman visited. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 had earlier displaced many Eastern nations, intensifying pressures west of the Mississippi. On the central Plains, a major multilateral Treaty of Fort Laramie would come in 1851, after Parkman's trip, seeking to define territories and protect the road. Meanwhile, the late 1840s saw the first permanent U.S. military posts in the Platte valley, such as Fort Kearny (established 1848). Parkman's narrative captures a pre-garrisoned window when traders, migrants, and Native parties negotiated rules more informally along the trail.

Disease and ecology powerfully shaped the trail experience. Epidemics had long ravaged Native communities—smallpox

and measles outbreaks earlier in the century altered demographics and power balances. For emigrants, cholera surged along the Platte in 1849, the year Parkman's book appeared, devastating wagon companies and leaving grave markers beside the road. Even without epidemic, the sheer number of animals and people eroded grass, fouled water, and displaced game. Parkman's accounts of buffalo hunts, scarcity of timber on the Platte, and debates over grazing illustrate how environment and movement intertwined, often to the detriment of both travelers and resident nations.

Technological and practical know-how determined success. Emigrants selected wagons—light “prairie schooners” rather than heavy Conestogas—debated oxen versus mules, and rationed flour, bacon, and ammunition. Steamboats carried people and goods to jumping-off towns on the Missouri, while the latest maps—especially Frémont and Charles Preuss's cartography—guided route choices to South Pass. Parkman traveled largely on horseback with hired expertise, highlighting the role of experienced hunters, interpreters, and traders in translating landscapes for newcomers. Firearms, black powder, and repair skills were as vital as navigation, binding frontier technology to daily routine and occasional crisis.

Social order on the trail often mirrored domestic hierarchies. Families apportioned labor—women cooked, mended, and managed children, while men tended animals, drove wagons, and hunted—though necessity frequently blurred roles. Parkman, a Harvard-educated Bostonian, observes this division while participating in a masculine culture of the hunt and the camp. His contrasts between urban refinement and prairie hardship were legible to readers who prized frontier vigor yet feared moral and physical degeneracy. The book thus records both the endurance demanded by the

road and the class-inflected lens through which an elite traveler evaluated the people he met and the skills they practiced.

Literary culture amplified the impact of such journeys. American readers consumed travel narratives that blended Romantic description, adventure, and quasi-ethnographic detail. Parkman wrote in that vein, crafting scenes of sublime landscapes, storms, and mountain vistas while providing close-up sketches of lodges, forts, and campfires. He would later become a major historian with his multivolume *France and England in North America*, but *The Oregon Trail* stands at the intersection of journalism and history, offering raw notes from a transforming region. Its style helped fix popular images of the West that circulated through newspapers, magazines, and parlors.

Protestant missions had been active in the Oregon Country since the 1830s, led by American boards that sent clergy to evangelize and found schools. Events at the Whitman Mission near present-day Walla Walla in 1847, where missionaries and settlers were killed amid disease and mounting tensions, shocked the nation and influenced territorial policy. Though Parkman's 1846 journey predated those killings, his occasional references to missionaries in the broader West sit within this contentious context: cultural translation proved difficult, health crises bred suspicion, and religious zeal at times collided with Native sovereignty and the practical authority of trading networks.

Legal and territorial structures shifted quickly after Parkman's return. In 1848, Congress created the Oregon Territory, formalizing U.S. governance in the Pacific Northwest. The California Gold Rush of 1848-1849 then sent unprecedented numbers onto the overland roads, intensifying demands for ferries, military protection, and

reliable provisioning. Parkman's book appeared in 1849 to an audience hungry for both guidance and spectacle; while not a guidebook, it mapped peoples, hazards, and landscapes that many readers were considering crossing themselves. Soon after, policies such as the Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 accelerated settlement, transforming the world his narrative had captured.

As state power consolidated, the trail corridor shifted from trader-policed commons to federalized thoroughfare. The U.S. Army purchased the former trading post at the Laramie site in 1849, formalizing it as Fort Laramie, and extended a chain of posts to patrol migration. Later treaties and conflicts would remake the Plains yet again. Parkman's text preserves an interstitial phase: wagons already rumbling west, Indigenous diplomacy still robust, and federal institutions only beginning to assert regularized control. That temporal position makes the book a valuable document for tracing how space becomes territory and how territory becomes governed land in the American imagination and lawscape.

Author Biography

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Francis Parkman (1823-1893) was a leading American historian of the nineteenth century, renowned for his sweeping narratives of European empires and Indigenous nations in North America. Writing in a vigorous, highly readable style, he explored the transatlantic contest between France and Britain and its shaping of the continent's political and cultural landscapes. His multivolume series *France and England in North America*, together with books like *The Oregon Trail* and *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*, secured his standing with general readers and scholars alike. Parkman's work combined documentary research with on-the-ground observation, leaving a legacy both admired for literary power and scrutinized for cultural and religious biases characteristic of his time.

Educated at Harvard College, where he graduated in the mid-1840s, Parkman absorbed a humanistic curriculum that encouraged broad reading and historical inquiry. He briefly pursued legal studies before committing himself to history and travel writing. The era's Romantic historiography influenced his approach, as did the example of prominent American historians such as William H. Prescott and George Bancroft, whose narrative methods and attention to archival sources Parkman admired. Harvard's intellectual environment and Boston's publishing world gave him access to libraries, manuscripts, and a receptive readership, helping to shape his blend of scholarly documentation and dramatic storytelling that became his signature.

In 1846 Parkman undertook a strenuous journey across parts of the American West, an experience that furnished the material for *The Oregon Trail*. First appearing in periodical form and then as a book in 1849, it combined travel narrative with observations on landscapes, settler life, and encounters with Plains peoples. The volume quickly established Parkman as a distinctive voice, admired for vivid description and narrative momentum. During and after these travels he struggled with chronic illness that impaired his eyesight and concentration. These limitations influenced his working routines, forcing him to write in brief intervals and to rely at times on assistants, yet they did not deter his historical ambitions.

Parkman's first major historical monograph, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851), examined the 1763 uprising that followed the Seven Years' War and the complex interplay among Indigenous nations, imperial authorities, and colonial communities. Drawing on British, French, and colonial records, the book demonstrated his commitment to primary sources and his capacity to render multifaceted events in a coherent dramatic arc. He continued to consult archives in North America and Europe, refining a method that joined documentary rigor with field reconnaissance of historic sites. The work's success confirmed Parkman's trajectory toward a grand synthesis of the continent's early modern struggles.

That synthesis found its fullest expression in France and England in North America, a sequence published between the 1860s and early 1890s. The series traced European exploration, missionary efforts, colonial governance, and warfare from the sixteenth century through the climactic Anglo-French conflict. Notable volumes include *Pioneers of France in the New World*, *The Jesuits in North America*, *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West*, *The Old Régime*

in Canada, Count Frontenac and New France under Louis XIV, Montcalm and Wolfe, and A Half-Century of Conflict. The books were widely read, praised for research and prose, yet frequently criticized for Anglo-Protestant bias and for caricatured depictions of Indigenous peoples and Catholic orders.

Parkman's worldview shaped both his subjects and his judgments. Skeptical of centralized authority and critical of Catholic missionary orders—especially the Jesuits—he emphasized individual enterprise and imperial rivalry in framing North American history. These positions, prominent in his narratives, drew sustained debate then and since. Alongside history, he pursued horticulture with seriousness, publishing *The Book of Roses* in 1866 and cultivating gardens that also served therapeutic purposes amid ongoing illness. His working methods were painstaking: he mined archives, compiled extensive notes, and, when necessary, dictated or used visual aids to continue writing despite physical constraints.

In his later years Parkman completed additional volumes of his series and consolidated his reputation as a master of literary history in the United States. He died in 1893 in Massachusetts, leaving a body of work that remained in print and continued to attract new readers. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars have reassessed his contributions, distinguishing enduring research strengths and narrative craft from period prejudices. An award bearing his name honors distinguished historical writing, reflecting the lasting association of Parkman with narrative excellence. Today his books are studied both as influential interpretations of early North America and as artifacts of their cultural moment.

The Oregon Trail

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CHAPTER I

THE FRONTIER

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Last spring, 1846, was a busy season in the City of St. Louis. Not only were emigrants from every part of the country preparing for the journey to Oregon and California, but an unusual number of traders were making ready their wagons and outfits for Santa Fe. Many of the emigrants, especially of those bound for California, were persons of wealth and standing. The hotels were crowded, and the gunsmiths and saddlers were kept constantly at work in providing arms and equipments for the different parties of travelers. Almost every day steamboats were leaving the levee and passing up the Missouri, crowded with passengers on their way to the frontier.

In one of these, the Radnor, since snagged and lost, my friend and relative, Quincy A. Shaw, and myself, left St. Louis on the 28th of April, on a tour of curiosity and amusement to the Rocky Mountains. The boat was loaded until the water broke alternately over her guards. Her upper deck was covered with large weapons of a peculiar form, for the Santa Fe trade[\[1\]](#), and her hold was crammed with goods for the same destination. There were also the equipments and provisions of a party of Oregon emigrants, a band of mules and horses, piles of saddles and harness, and a multitude of nondescript articles, indispensable on the prairies. Almost hidden in this medley one might have seen

a small French cart, of the sort very appropriately called a “mule-killer[2]” beyond the frontiers, and not far distant a tent, together with a miscellaneous assortment of boxes and barrels. The whole equipage was far from prepossessing in its appearance; yet, such as it was, it was destined to a long and arduous journey, on which the persevering reader will accompany it.

The passengers on board the Radnor corresponded with her freight. In her cabin were Santa Fe traders, gamblers, speculators, and adventurers of various descriptions, and her steerage was crowded with Oregon emigrants, “mountain men,” negroes, and a party of Kansas Indians, who had been on a visit to St. Louis.

Thus laden, the boat struggled upward for seven or eight days against the rapid current of the Missouri, grating upon snags, and hanging for two or three hours at a time upon sand-bars. We entered the mouth of the Missouri in a drizzling rain, but the weather soon became clear, and showed distinctly the broad and turbid river, with its eddies, its sand-bars, its ragged islands, and forest-covered shores. The Missouri is constantly changing its course; wearing away its banks on one side, while it forms new ones on the other. Its channel is shifting continually. Islands are formed, and then washed away; and while the old forests on one side are undermined and swept off, a young growth springs up from the new soil upon the other. With all these changes, the water is so charged with mud and sand that it is perfectly opaque, and in a few minutes deposits a sediment an inch thick in the bottom of a tumbler. The river was now high; but when we descended in the autumn it was fallen

52 Hawks'-bells were small metal bells traded and worn as ornaments by Plains peoples and trapper communities; they could be attached to clothing, harnesses, or birds used in falconry. In the fur-trade and indigenous material culture of the period, such bells were common trade items valued for their sound and decorative function.

53 The Rocky Mountain sheep (commonly called bighorn sheep, *Ovis canadensis*) are a high-altitude wild sheep native to western North America, noted for their surefootedness on cliffs and for the large curled horns of mature males. Indigenous peoples and mountain hunters prized their meat and horns, which were sometimes fashioned into utilitarian objects such as ladles.

54 Bent's Fort was a prominent 1830s-1840s adobe trading post on the Arkansas River (in present-day Colorado) operated by the Bent-St. Vrain company. It functioned as a commercial and diplomatic rendezvous between Plains tribes, Mexican traders, and American trappers, making it a key waypoint for travelers heading east or west.

55 The "Strong Hearts" refers to a Plains Indian war society or warrior association active among Dakota (Sioux) and Cheyenne groups, composed chiefly of young braves. Such societies held ritual dances, maintained rules of conduct in warfare, and often had a tutelary animal spirit (here the fox) associated with their identity and ideals of courage.

56 Long's Peak is a prominent mountain in what is now north-central Colorado and a part of the Rocky Mountain range; in the 19th century it was sometimes believed to be one of the highest summits in the Rockies. Later and more accurate surveys showed several other peaks to be higher, but Long's Peak remained a notable landmark for travelers.

57 Prairie dogs are social, burrowing rodents (genus *Cynomys*) native to North American grasslands; Parkman calls them 'marmots' and describes their colonies and characteristic mounds. They live in large communal 'towns,' make alarm calls when disturbed, and create conspicuous surface mounds around their burrow entrances.

58 Nauvoo was a large settlement in Illinois established by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) in the early 1840s and the site of a prominent temple. In the mid-1840s the community was forced to leave amid violent opposition, and the temple and other buildings were damaged and later destroyed in the years after the Mormons departed.

59 Calomel is the historical name for mercurous chloride, a compound widely used by 19th-century physicians as a purgative and general remedy. Large or repeated doses often caused mercury poisoning and could produce serious, lasting neurological and physical harm, so its routine use could worsen patients' condition.

60 General Kearny refers to Stephen W. Kearny, a United States Army officer who led the so-called Army of the West along the Santa Fe Trail during the mid-1840s. His expeditions during the Mexican-American War and subsequent patrols brought U.S. military presence to the plains, and his threats against violence to settlers influenced relations with Plains tribes.

61 A dragoon was a type of mounted soldier, so 'dragoon-horses' denotes horses used by military dragoons rather than civilian pack animals. These animals were generally regarded as better-broken and more valuable than ordinary prairie horses or oxen, which explains why finding escaped dragoon mounts was noteworthy to travelers.

62 Kit Carson (1809–1868) was a well-known American frontiersman, trapper, and guide famous for his work in the Rocky Mountains and the American West. Parkman’s reference to him as “pre-eminent in running buffalo” reflects Carson’s contemporaneous reputation for horsemanship and frontier hunting skill.

63 The Arapahoes (often spelled Arapaho) are a Native American Plains people historically based in regions now part of Colorado, Wyoming, and Nebraska; in the 19th century many Arapaho bands lived as hunters of bison. Parkman’s depiction of Arapahoes engaged in large communal buffalo hunts reflects this central economic and cultural role on the Great Plains.

64 In the text “yager” is an informal frontier spelling of jaeger or jäger, used by English speakers to mean a hunter’s gun. Here it refers to Ellis’s long hunting rifle — the personal firearm he boasts about and ultimately fires once during the journey.

65 A “buffalo robe” is a tanned bison hide used as a blanket, bed covering, or jacket by plains travelers, trappers, and Indigenous peoples. In the narrative it serves as bedding and shelter, explaining why characters emerge from or are wrapped in such robes at camp.

66 “Tete Rouge” is a French-derived nickname meaning “Red Head,” used in the book as the familiar sobriquet of a camp member. Such nicknames were common among voyageurs and frontier groups and signal his role and personality (jovial, gourmand, and something of a jester) within the party.

67 The Cimarron refers to the Cimarron Cutoff of the Santa Fe Trail, a more direct but arid route across the Great Plains

and the Cimarron Desert. It was notorious for scarce water and higher risk to travelers, which is why some commanders preferred the Arkansas River route.

68 A percussion cap is a small metal cap containing a shock-sensitive explosive (commonly mercury fulminate in the 19th century) that, when struck by a firearm's hammer, ignites the gunpowder charge. This ignition method replaced flintlocks in the early 1800s and was standard for many frontier rifles and pistols of Parkman's era.

69 The Mormon Battalion was a U.S. Army unit composed largely of Latter-day Saint volunteers that served during the Mexican-American War (1846–1847). Parkman refers to this organized military migration of Mormon men (with some families) as they marched toward California to receive government pay and provisions.

70 In this context 'Missourians' denotes settlers, wagoners, and volunteer fighters from the state of Missouri who commonly traveled the frontier in the 1840s. Missouri was a major jumping-off point for westward migration, and contemporary accounts often depict its men as rough, heavily armed wagoners and militia.

71 A 'sutler' was a civilian merchant who followed military camps or operated at forts and sold provisions, sundries, and often alcoholic drinks; 'sutler's stores' are the goods such a vendor stocked. On the frontier, sutlers were common suppliers to soldiers, emigrants, and steamboat passengers.

72 The Planters' House was a prominent 19th-century hotel in St. Louis frequented by river travelers, businessmen, and politicians. Parkman's party staying there marks their