ABSTRACT

Reconciling the "Mystery Letter": Frémont's Fourth Expedition, John Kern Strecker, and the Baylor University Museum

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Found amongst the collections of the Mayborn Museum Complex, the subject of this thesis is an enthralling fragment of a "Mystery Letter." Written in 1849 by Benjamin J. Kern, a surviving member of the Fourth Frémont Expedition, the letter weaves a harrowing tale of starvation, mutiny, and cannibalism. Significant to the history of the Western frontier, the letter also holds relevance to one of Baylor University's most beloved sons, John Kern Strecker. Revisiting Strecker and the Baylor University Museum through the lens of the undocumented object, much is learned about the institution's history. The letter is evaluated for its present and future function at Baylor, particularly in light of the growth of the Mayborn Museum Complex as it adapts along with its constituents and modern museum practice. Despite the letter's profound relevance to the museum and Strecker, the greatest public and academic use of the letter is via transfer to a more appropriate institution.

Reconciling the "Mystery Letter": Frémont's Fourth Expedition, John Kern Strecker, and the Baylor University Museum

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Museum Studies

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I am greatly indebted to Dr. Hafertepe, Professor Holcomb, and the entire faculty of the Museum Studies Department for their guidance in this project. I also extend thanks to "The Gracks," for they have made the past two years at Baylor University more than worthwhile. In undated notes for a speech given by John Kern Strecker, Strecker quipped "will any good ever come out of Arkansas?" As a proud Arkansan who has spent the last two years in the heart of Texas, I can only hope that Strecker would be able to answer in the affirmative.

for Rachel

# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

With finite time and resources, museum collection managers are continually making cost-benefit decisions. Among the factors that influence the collection worker's decision-making process are cost, preservation of the objects, objects' potential use to the museum, community perception of collection practices, professional standards, and relevance to the collecting plan and scope. Which portion of the collection more desperately needs rehousing? Does the collection need to acquire another nineteenth century piano? Will this influential donor be offended if we choose to deaccession their prized collection of sad irons? In the reality of collections work, there are rarely easy answers and ignoring dilemmas becomes simpler than making the tough decisions. Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gillmore, in their book *Collection Conundrums: Solving Collections Management Mysteries*, write:

> When human nature mixes with chronic lack of space, too few collections staff and informal collecting histories, museums face some form of this problem. Its manifestations include accessioned objects that are not useful to the museum, partially accessioned objects, found-in-collection objects, old loans, deaccessioned objects never discarded, wrongly accessioned property, abandoned property and special supplemental collections. Throw in a few institutional transfers, some special event decorations and a reproduction returned as an object from a white elephant sale or give-away from the past, and the mix becomes extremely difficult to sort out.[1]

The Mayborn Museum Complex at Baylor University, despite being just five years old, has a collection that dates back to 1893. With such vast and rambling collections, the Mayborn, formerly the Strecker Museum and before that the Baylor University

[1] Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore, *Collection Conundrums: Solving Collections Management Mysteries* (Washington D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2007), 3.

Museum, has spent recent years attempting to sort out one hundred and sixteen years of collection conundrums.

Housing large biology, geology, history, archaeology, and ethnography collections, the museum has been refocusing their collection toward the needs of the new Mayborn Museum. Many portions of the collection require review of their possible utility in advancing the mission of the museum. The flat-file, or two dimension collection of documentary artifacts, is among these areas. Though the Texas Collection is a Baylor operated institution that specializes in archival collections, the Mayborn has retained a sizable collection of documentary artifacts. Most of the objects in the flat file are assorted odds and ends the Strecker Museum had accumulated, obviously with little discretion as to their potential use. Among the myriad undocumented objects, one in particular had managed to pique the interest of the collections staff – the "Mystery Letter."

According to museum terminology, the "Mystery Letter" is referred to as a found in collection object: an artifact found amongst the collection with no numbers or information that connects it with any documentation. In most instances, a museum owns a found in collection object, but simply lacks the documentation to support their ownership.[2] This thesis, in part, is an attempt to reconcile the "Mystery Letter" with any information that may exist to establish provenance, and thus the museum's claim to ownership. Scouring the old accession books, the institutional archives, the collection database, and virtually every source the museum had to offer, the search for provenance became a protracted and arduous task. After gathering clues and consulting the immense resources now at the disposal of the modern researcher, the subject and authorship of the

[2] Buck and Gilmore, *Collection Conundrums*, 37.

letter was identified. The letter was penned by a medical doctor from Philadelphia, Benjamin Kern. Kern and two of his brothers accompanied John Charles Frémont in 1848 on his fourth expedition across the Rocky Mountains. Ending in disaster and the deaths of ten men, the Kerns narrowly escaped the cold and starvation with their lives.

The discovery of the Kern letter comes along a line of similar finds, in which documents of Frémont's fourth expedition have surfaced across America, throughout the twentieth century. As an incredibly rare artifact of the American frontier, the Kern letter is also significant because of its connection to Philadelphia and a circle of prominent intellectuals and artists. Descended from members of this influential group and great-nephew of Benjamin Kern, John Kern Strecker became the driving force behind the study of natural history in Texas and the Baylor University Museum. Throughout this process, much was discovered about the history of the museum and Strecker's genealogy, but not only that, the letter came to serve as an emblem or metaphor for the collections of the Mayborn Museum Complex.

While planning for the move from the Strecker Museum to the new museum complex, Dr. Stephen Williams and David Lintz wrote about the importance of the Baylor history collection. "With the history of the University and the museum dating back to the mid-1800s, a serious obligation exists to document and exhibit the heritage that has been instrumental in making the University what it is today."[3] The Kern letter is an example of how the museum has struggled to fulfill this aspect of the mission of the Mayborn. The Kern letter became the impetus, the framework, for researching John Kern Strecker and his contributions to Baylor. One of the museum's most significant

[3] David Lintz and Stephen Williams, "The Baylor History Collection" Baylor University, Mayborn Museum Complex. Object within the Mayborn museum collection will hereafter be identified as BU-MMC.

historical artifacts, the Kern letter easily fits within the museum's collecting scope. With that being said, the greatest significance of the letter is to the American frontier, rather than the history of Baylor University. The museum is unlikely and currently unable to provide adequate access to the letter, and as such, transfer to a more appropriate institution is recommended. Though the Mayborn Museum may not formally accession and catalog the letter, much has been gained. Through the Kern letter and the research it has generated the museum is more able to tell the fascinating narrative of John Kern Strecker, his lineage as a son of the Philadelphia intellectual elite, and the history of the Baylor University Museum.

# CHAPTER TWO

## The Mystery Letter

During the reorganization and rehousing of the Mayborn Museum Complex's two-dimensional history collection, a several fantastic artifacts were uncovered, many of which were unnumbered and undocumented. This included objects such as a set of original prints of Norman Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*, early Central Texas land grants, medieval European documents on vellum, and a scrapbook about the life of one of the museum's first curators, and former namesake, John K. Strecker. Finding such hidden treasures was not altogether surprising. Most museums have a backlog of neglected collections work, and the Mayborn Museum Complex is no exception. Having been first established as a museum in 1893, the Baylor University Museum, which has twice been renamed, houses a large and varied collection. Currently, the Mayborn has separate collections for history, geology, ethnography, archaeology, and biology objects. With over one hundred and sixteen years of erratic collecting practices and frequent moves from one building to another, the maintenance of adequate records and locations for the entire collection has been difficult. The collection of two-dimensional documentary artifacts is emblematic of how these difficulties may manifest.

The flat file at the Mayborn currently consists of six medium-size cabinets, two oversize cabinets, and two bays of shelves with assorted archival boxes. Within each of the cabinets are wooden trays, each a few inches deep, that slide in and out of gray metal frames at adjustable heights. Virtually no method of organization existed, but a loose subject-based grouping of moldy newspaper clippings, postcards, and a small group of

institutional materials. Roughly half of the flat file collections were cataloged or accessioned. However, the vast majority of those documented had minimal descriptions. Amongst thousands of poorly housed, unorganized, inadequately recorded, and wonderfully unique objects, one document was so enthralling, and apparently elusive, that it was housed in an aged archival folder with the printed label: "Mystery Letter."

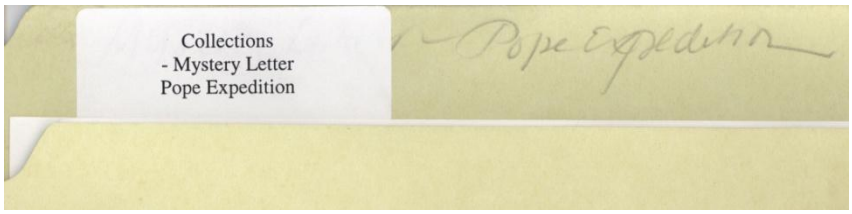
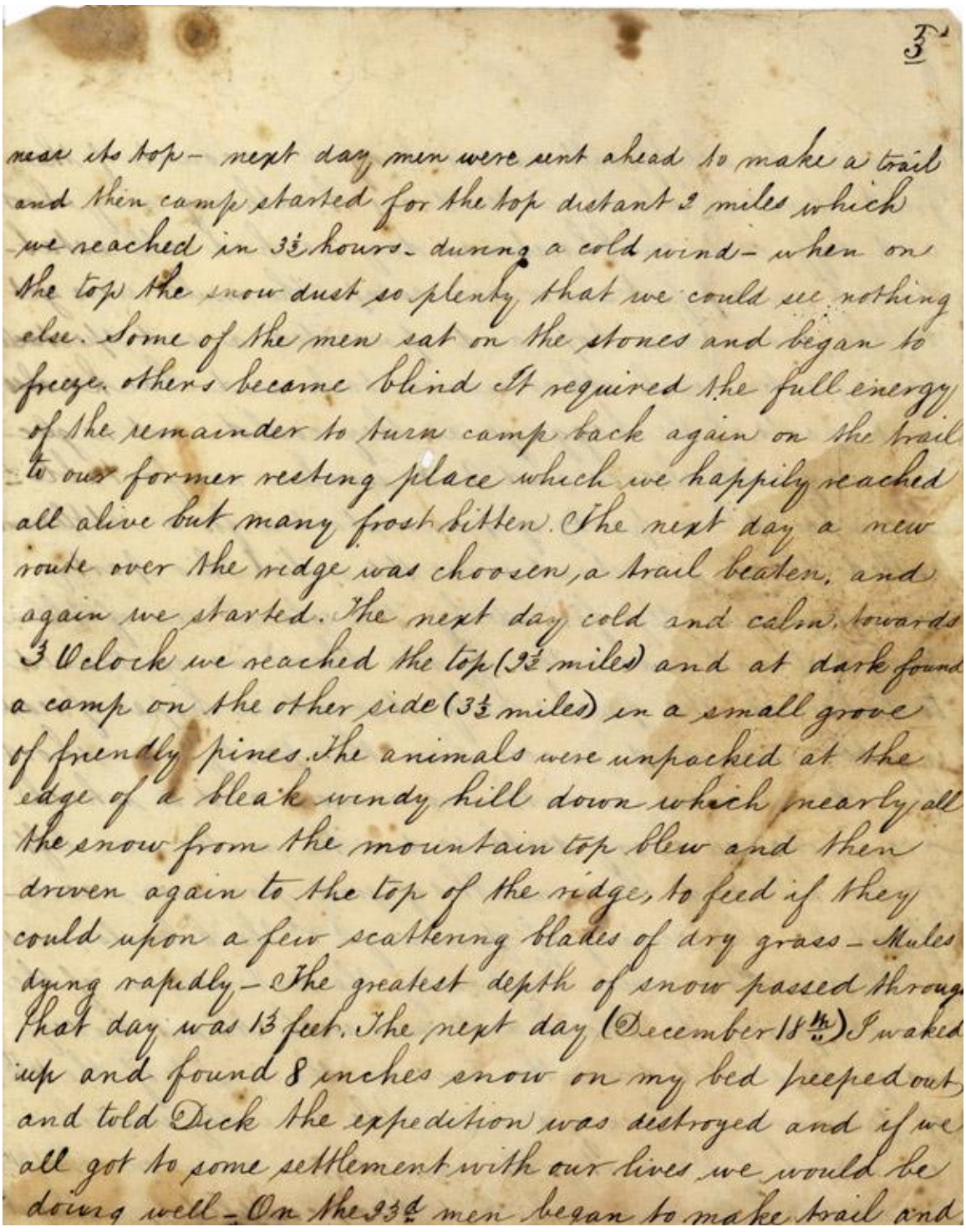


Fig. 1. The Mystery Letter archival folder, BU-MMC.

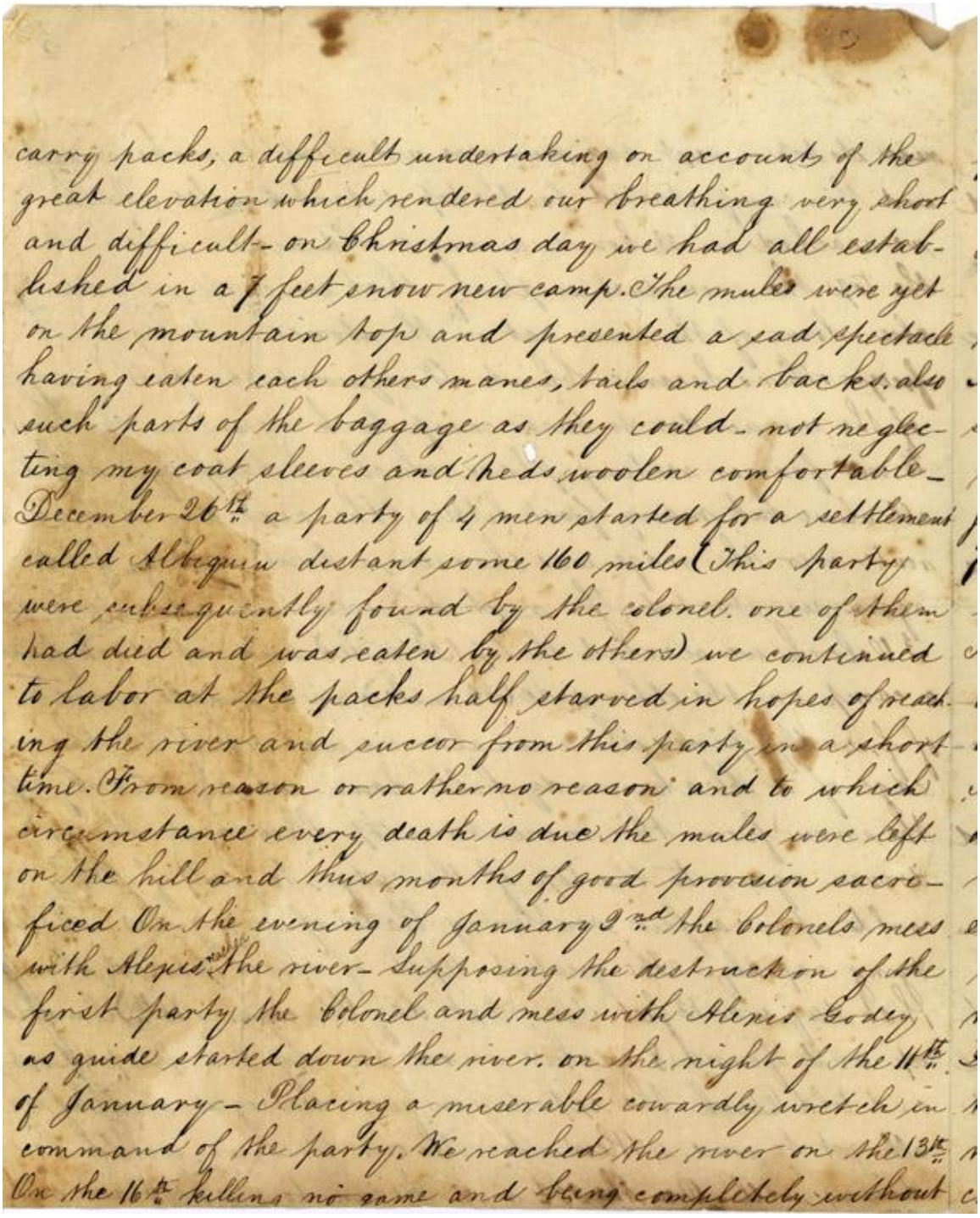
While many other objects were housed in their own pale green folders, and some even had handwritten or printed labels, only the mystery letter's folder had a label that marked the document it held as an unknown entity. Certainly the person who created the label understood a large percentage of the rest of collection was also unknown and undocumented. Beneath the printed label is a partially obscured handwritten note - "Pope Expedition." Inside the folder was a single sheet of aged and stained paper, folded in half, with script in heavy black ink on all four sides. Fortunately, the previous worker who rehoused the letter interleaved it with acid-free paper, ensuring that the ink did not bleed from one page to another. Why did the past collections staff take time to investigate this one document and note their failure, when hundreds of others did not receive the same treatment? After a quick scan of the letter, it was readily apparent:



3

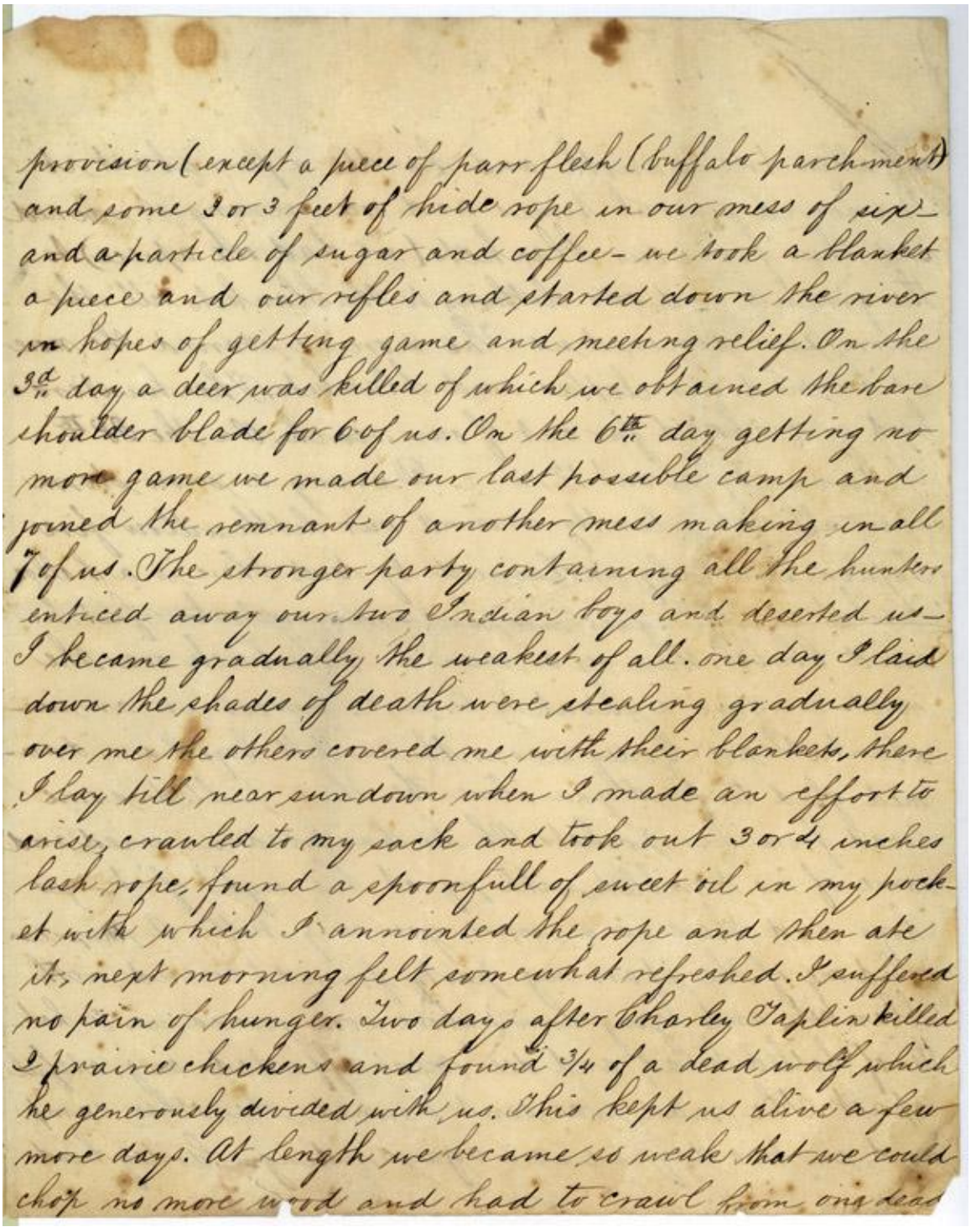
near its top – next day men were sent ahead to make a trail and then camp started for the top distant 3 miles which we reached in 3½ hours – during a cold wind – when on the top the snow dust so plenty that we could see nothing else. Some of the men sat on the stones and began to freeze. others became blind It required the full energy of the remainder to turn camp back again on the trail to our former resting place which we happily reached all alive but many frost bitten. The next day a new route over the ridge was choosen, a trail beaten, and again we started. The next day cold and calm. towards 3 Oclock we reached the top (3½ miles) and at dark found a camp on the other side (3½ miles) in a small grove of friendly pines. The animals were unpacked at the edge of a bleak windy hill down which nearly all the snow from the mountain top blew and then driven again to the top of the ridge, to feed if they could upon a few scattering blades of dry grass – Mules dying rapidly – The greatest depth of snow passed throug that day was 13 feet. The next day (December 18th) I waked up and found 8 inches snow on my bed peeped out and told Dick the expedition was destroyed and if we all got to some settlement with our lives we would be doing well – On the 23d men began to make trail and

Fig. 2. Page one of the Mystery Letter fragment. Note the numeral three in the upper right hand corner, indicating this is actually the third page of a larger document. BU-MMC.



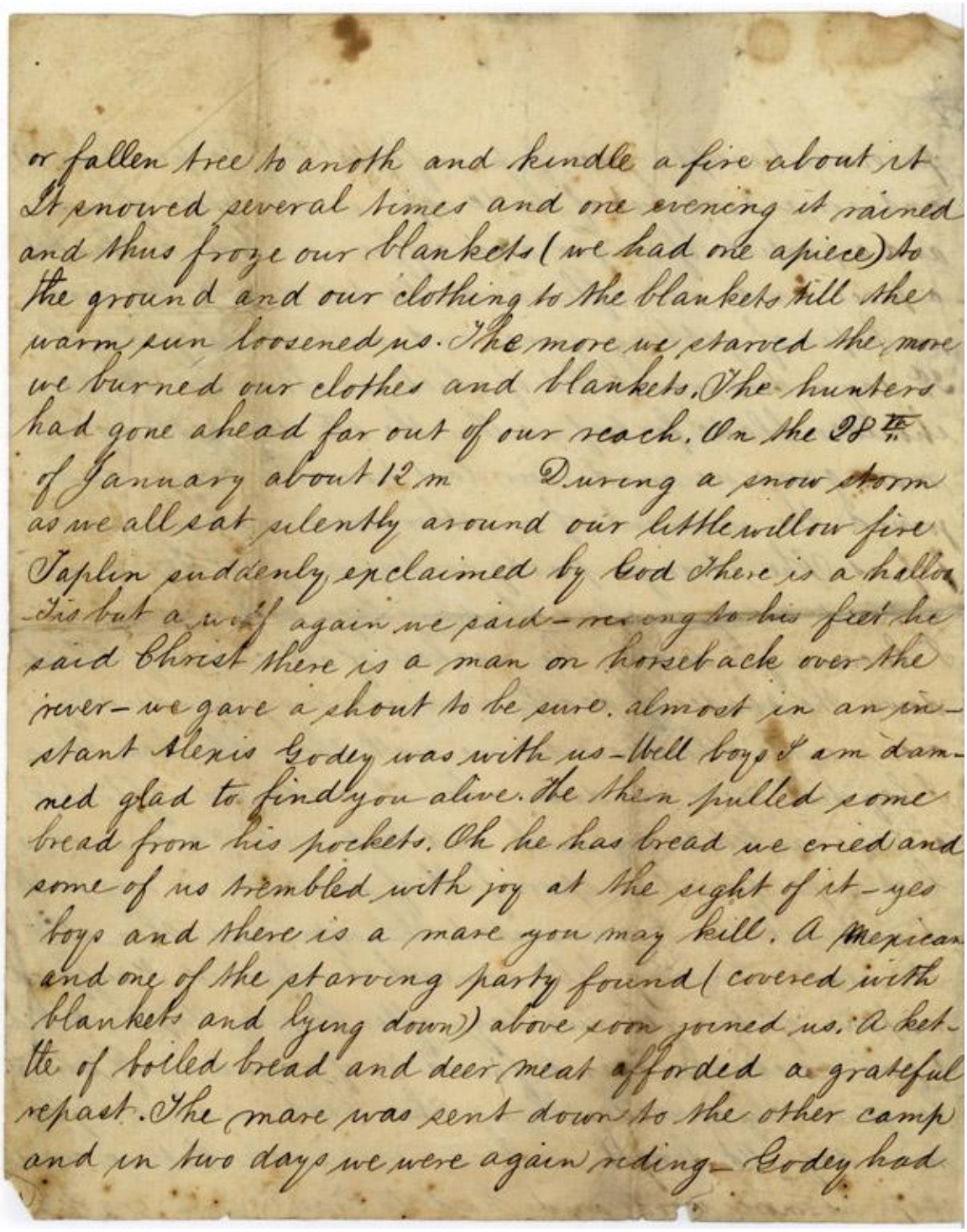
carry packs, a difficult undertaking on account of the great elevation which rendered our breathing very short and difficult- on Christmas day we had all established in a 7 feet snow new camp. The mules were yet on the mountain top and presented a sad spectacle having eaten each others manes, tails and backs. also such parts of the baggage as they could- not neglecting my coat sleeves and heads woolen comfortable- December 26th a party of 4 men started for a settlement called Albequiu distant some 160 miles (This party were subsequently found by the colonel. one of them had died and was eaten by the others) we continued to labor at the packs half starved in hopes of reaching the river and succor from this party in a short time. From reason or rather no reason and to which circumstance every death is due the mules were left on the hill and thus months of good provision sacrificed On the evening of January 2nd the Colonels mess with Alexis the river- Supposing the destruction of the first party the Colonel and mess with Alexis Godey as guide started down the river. on the night of the 11th of January- Placing a miserable cowardly wretch in command of the party. We reached the river on the 13th On the 16th killing no game and being completely without

Fig. 3. Page two of the Mystery Letter fragment, BU-MMC.



provision (except a piece of parr flesh (buffalo parchment) and some 3 or 3 feet of hide rope in our mess of six— and a particle of sugar and coffee— we took a blanket a piece and our rifles and started down the river in hopes of getting game and meeting relief. On the 3d day a deer was killed of which we obtained the bare shoulder blade for 6 of us. On the 6th day getting no more game we made our last possible camp and joined the remnant of another mess making in all 7 of us. The stronger party containing all the hunters enticed away our two Indian boys and deserted us— I became gradually the weakest of all. one day I laid down the shades of death were stealing gradually over me the others covered me with their blankets, there I lay till near sundown when I made an effort to arise, crawled to my sack and took out 3 or 4 inches lash rope, found a spoonfull of sweet oil in my pocket with which I annointed the rope and then ate it, next morning felt somewhat refreshed. I suffered no pain of hunger. Two days after Charley Taplin killed 2 prairie chickens and found 3/4 of a dead wolf which he generously divided with us. This kept us alive a few more days. At length we became so weak that we could chop no more wood and had to crawl from one dead

Fig. 4. Page three of the Mystery Letter fragment, BU-MMC.



or fallen tree to anoth and kindle a fire about it
It snowed several times and one evening it rained
and thus froze our blankets (we had one apiece) to
the ground and our clothing to the blankets till the
warm sun loosened us. The more we starved the more
we burned our clothes and blankets. The hunters
had gone ahead far out of our reach. On the 28th
of January about 12 m During a snow storm
as we all sat silently around our little willow fire
Taplin suddenly exclaimed by God there is a hellon
this but a wolf again we said - rising to his feet he
said Christ there is a man on horseback over the
river - we gave a shout to be sure. almost in an in-
stant Alexis Godey was with us - Well boys I am dam-
ned glad to find you alive. He then pulled some
bread from his pockets. Oh he has bread we cried and
some of us trembled with joy at the sight of it - yes
boys and there is a mare you may kill. A Mexican
and one of the starving party found (covered with
blankets and lying down) above soon joined us. A ket-
tle of boiled bread and deer meat afforded a grateful
repast. The mare was sent down to the other camp
and in two days we were again reding - Godey had

Fig. 5. Page four of the Mystery Letter fragment, BU-MMC.

> Some of the men sat on the stones and began to freeze others became blind. It required the full energy of the remainder to turn camp back again on the trail to our former resting place which we happily reached all alive but many frost bitten. …This party were subsequently found by the colonel. One of them had died and was eaten by the others…Mules dying rapidly – The greatest depth of snow passed through that day was 13 feet. The next day (December 18th) I waked up and found 8 inches snow on my bed peeped out and told Dick the expedition was destroyed and if we all got to some settlement with our lives we would be doing well…I became gradually the weakest of all. One day I laid down the shades of death were stealing gradually over me the others covered me with their blankets, there I lay till near sundown when I made an effort to arise, crawled to my sack and took out 3 or 4 inches lash rope, found a spoonfull of sweet oil in my pocket with which I annointed the rope and then ate it. [sic][4]

The four page letter contained just under a thousand words that spoke of a horrible expedition, mutiny, cannibalism, starvation, and death. For a full transcription of the letter, see Appendix A. The paper was rather aged, with the old ink faded in spots – all signs seemed to date it from the nineteenth century. The letter had neither beginning, nor end, indicating it was only the inner page of a longer document. After bringing the discovery to the attention of the Collections Assistant and others, it appeared that former staff members had been obsessed with identifying the dramatic letter, but to no avail. With no catalog or accession number, museum staff struggled to determine the author and subject of the letter and how the museum came to possess it.

The earliest surviving piece of documentation related to this mystery came in 1981, when a student in the Museum Studies program at Baylor University contacted New Mexico State Library to ask for assistance with identifying the letter (see Appendix B for all correspondence concerning the Mystery Letter). The student identified "Charley Taplin" and Albiquiu, New Mexico, as clues – erroneously proposing that the letter could have come from the 1854 Pope Expedition, of which Taplin was a member.

[4] Benjamin Kern Letter, BU-MMC.

Though the museum does not have a copy of the response that could be located, there was likely little success. In 1983, Calvin Smith, then director of the Strecker Museum, contacted a friend and scholar at the Museum of New Mexico, Lonn Taylor:

> I am enclosing something that I ran across recently that I felt like you would be very interested in. This is all the information in the files, including the 1981 letter and some notes by the researcher on a letter we have in our possession that is extremely intriguing. Page 1, 2, 7, and 8 are not here. It is remotely possible that they are in your collection. If so, or if you feel you can use it in any way, I feel that it should be transferred to you because of its historical significance.[5]

The information that Calvin Smith alluded to were the notes and letter that the previously mentioned student had written two years prior. Taylor responded, noting that the letter was certainly "tantalizing" in content, but that the only clues he could derive were "Charles Toplin, Alexis Godey, and Albiquiu."[6] Though Talyor mentioned that he would pass Smith's inquiry along to the New Mexico state historian, no follow-up response was received or found. The letter fragment certainly was mysterious and dramatic; however, for all those who attempted to identify it, the resources at hand were simply not enough.

Aside from these three letters written between 1981 and 1983, no documentation mentioned this mystery letter. While previous researchers found their own resources inadequate, the Internet and rapid digitization of archival resources brought renewed possibilities of identifying the letter. Similarly, the three most practical clues found were Albquiu, Taplin, and Godey. Albiquiu, now Abiquiu, is in fact a very old and small Indian town in northern New Mexico, most famous as being home to Georgia O'Keefe

[5] Calvin Smith to Lonn Taylor, BU-MMC.

[6] Ibid.

and the great adobe St. Thomas Church.[7] Brief research of the town brought no information of any expedition in particular, though apparently it was a common outpost.[8] Charley Taplin was a member of the Pope Expedition, as well as a veteran of the Texas War for Independence, and of many other expeditions including the second, third, and fourth Frémont Expeditions, as well as the Gunnison Expedition. [9] The third clue, Alexis Godey proved to be the most significant. Alexis Godey was a trapper and scout of French heritage, friend of John C. Frémont and Kit Carson, veteran of the Bear Flag Revolution in California, and member of numerous expeditions.[10] Taplin and Godey were both members of Frémont's second, third, and fourth expeditions.

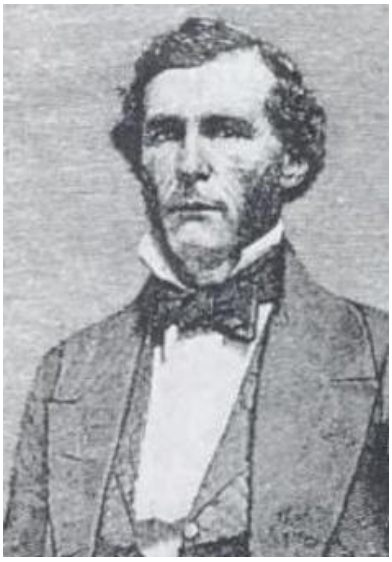


Fig. 6. Alexis Godey

Fig. 7. John Charles Frémont

[7] National Park Service, "Georgia O'Keefe House." http://www.nps.gov/history/nR/feature/wom/1999/o'keeffe.htm (accessed May 21, 2009).

[8] Ralph E. Twitchell, "The Leading Facts of New Mexican History." *Google Books.* Torch Press. 1917. http://books.google.com/books?id=GUUOAAAAIAAJ&printsec=toc (accessed June 10, 2009).

[9] Alpheus H. Favour, *Old Bill Williams, Mountain Man* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 177.

[10] John W. Robinson, *Godey, Alexis.* October 2008. http://www.anb.org/articles/20/20-01907.html (accessed June 11, 2009).

Certainly "the colonel" that the letter refers to as the group's leader was Colonel John C. Frémont. The context of the letter indicated that the expedition saw incredible hardships, including mutiny, death, and cannibalism. Only a very small number of expeditions ever met these criteria, and just one of Frémont's expeditions experienced such difficulties. After locating a transcript of the mystery letter in a collection of primary documents concerning the expedition, it became apparent the letter was written by a member of the Fourth Frémont Expedition of 1848-1849.[11]

After years of intrigue on part of the museum's collection staff, the subject of the letter had been identified with the aid of searchable databases of books and archival materials. While Calvin Smith, Lonn Taylor, and the staff at the Strecker Museum had a notion of the historical significance of the letter, it was not yet clear that the letter spoke of men and an expedition that are now legendary in the history of the American West. John Charles Frémont and the Fourth Expedition are the subject of numerous books, dissertations, and journal articles, with the primary documents relating to the disaster being incredibly valuable to historians. Not only was John Charles Frémont one of the most famous men in America in the 1840s and 1850s, his fourth expedition was the subject of national controversy, particularly during his 1856 presidential campaign as the first candidate of the Republican Party. Thus, the letter is but a portion of a well-known expedition of one of the most infamous explorers in American history, and an important narrative in the story of the western frontier. As a museum object, it is incredibly rare and deserves consideration beyond that of a typical undocumented object.

[11] Leroy R. Hafen, *Frémont's Fourth Expedition; A Documentary Account of the Disaster of 1848-1849, with Diaries, Letters, and Reports by Participants in the Tragedy* (Glendale: A.H. Clark Co., 1960).

## CHAPTER THREE

### Frémont's Fourth Expedition and the Kern Brothers

John Charles Frémont was born in Savannah, Georgia, on January 21, 1813.[1] He was the illegitimate child of Ann Beverly Whiting and a French emigrant named Charles Frémon. Whiting had fled Richmond, Virginia, and a previous marriage with her new lover, but Frémon would die while John was still a child.[2] After moving with his mother and siblings to Charleston, South Carolina, Frémont attended the College of Charleston as a student in the Science Department. He was expelled shortly before graduation for neglecting to regularly attend his lessons. Undeterred, Frémont established connections with important South Carolinians, through their influence he secured a position first as a mathematics teacher aboard the U.S.S. Natchez, and then as an assistant on surveys for the Charleston and Cincinnati Railroad, and later as a commission as a second lieutenant in the United States Corps of Topographical Engineers.[3] Rallied by John L. Sullivan's iconic phrase, men such as Frémont were pulled into the American west: "manifest destiny of this nation to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."[4] Frémont was assigned to a two-year expedition in the Minnesota country with the famed cartographer and innovator, Joseph Nicollet. Following his tutelage under Nicollet, Frémont became skilled at various

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[1] Mary Lee Spence, forward to *Trail to Disaster*, by Patricia J. Richmond (Denver: Colorado Historical Society, 1990), *v.*

[2] David Roberts, *A Newer World : Kit Carson, John C. Frémont, and the Claiming of the American West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 111.

[3] Spence, forward to *Trail to Disaster*, *vi.*

[4] Roberts, *A Newer World*, 28.

methods of geodetic surveying. Frémont continued to rub elbows with the privileged elite. However, on a visit to Washington D.C. to the home of Senator Thomas Hart Benton, Frémont would make the most significant connections of his life – setting him on the course to become the great "Pathfinder" of the American West.

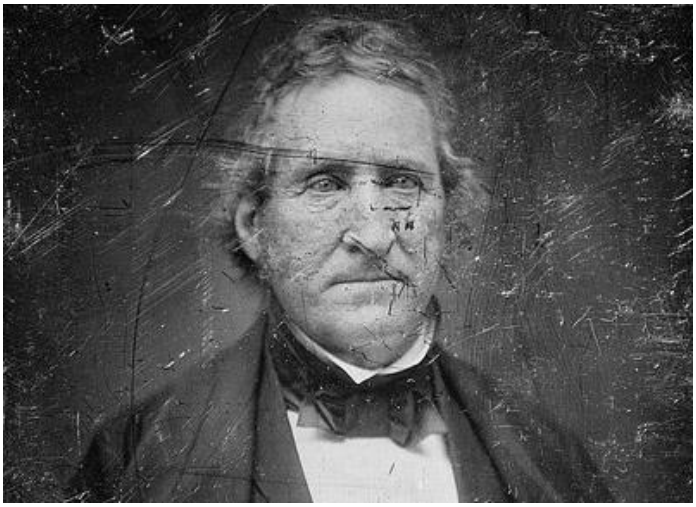

Fig. 8. Thomas Hart Benton

Having made an impression on the senior senator from Missouri, Frémont was invited to the Benton home, where Frémont would meet his future wife, Jessie Benton. Jessie was just fifteen at the time, while John was twenty-six-years-old, but still they forged a clandestine relationship. The two were secretly married on October 19, 1841.[5] Upon learning the news, Thomas Hart Benton flew into a tirade and banned John from ever entering his home again. Within a year, Benton came to accept his daughter's marriage to John, and eventually he took his son-in-law on as his protege.[6] Benton would come to instill his life-long dream in his son-in-law: the belief that all great empires are

[5]Frémont also began to spell his name with an accent mark over the 'e', though it is unknown when he began using a "t" at the end of his name. Spence, foreward of *Trail to Disaster*, *vi*.

[6] Roberts, *A Newer World*, 117.

built upon control the means of trade transportation. Benton, a senator since 1821 and former advisor to Thomas Jefferson, envisioned a great railway between St. Louis, his hometown, and San Francisco. Such a railroad, in Benton's mind, would open up trade with Asia and usher in an era of American dominance and imperialism.[7] In fact, the last conversation that Benton had with Thomas Jefferson before his death in 1826, was about the need for exploration into the unknown West. In the young John C. Frémont, Benton found a means to assert control over new expeditions into the West and connect himself inextricably with the fruits of his protege's labor. Frémont would later remark that Benton's visions were "pregnant with results and decisive of my life."[8]

Assigning John C. Frémont as leader, Thomas Hart Benton began to push legislation through Congress appropriating tens of thousands of dollars to finance surveys into the Western frontier. First in 1842, Frémont first set out to survey the "Platte or Nebraska river," and though he hardly set foot onto unexplored ground. While men such as Kit Carson, Joseph Walker, and Jedidiah Smith were, as Allan Nevins wrote, "the true pathfinders," their "knowledge was relatively useless, for it could not be diffused."[9] Frémont's contribution lay mainly in his skillful maps and inspiring, though at times embellished, reports.[10] With Benton's direction, Frémont would embark upon five expeditions in total. Each, Benton remarked was "conceived without its [the government's] knowledge, and executed upon solicited order, of which the design was

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[7] Brandon, William. *The Men and the Mountain: Frémont's Fourth Expedition* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1955), 49.

[8] Roberts, *A Newer World*, 30.

[9] Ibid, 31.

[10] William H. Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: the Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West*. (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1993), 233.

unknown."[11] Reports of Frémont's first two expeditions, aided by Jessie Benton Frémont's heightened prose, were published by Congress.[12] John would become a national hero. Frémont and Benton devised expeditions that not only surveyed with detail the geological, topographical, and biological environment of the Western United State, but simultaneously pushed the limits of American policy toward expansion and opened the doors to the frontier.

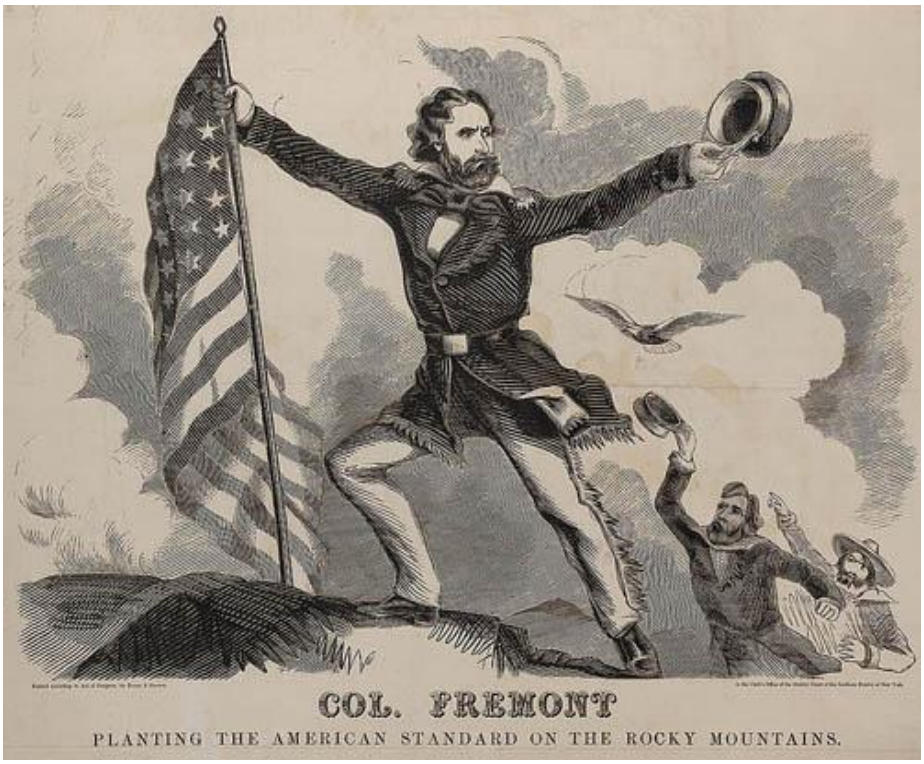

Fig. 9. 1840s print of an idealized Frémont

Having lit a beacon atop the Rocky Mountains, John Charles Frémont would recruit some of the most talented and adventuresome men in America for his expeditions. With that being said, which of these men was it that penned the Mayborn's mystery

[11] Ibid, 240.

[12] Spence, foreword of *Trail to Disaster*, *vii*.

letter? In consulting texts and firsthand accounts of the expedition, it quickly became apparent that the letter had been written by Benjamin Kern, a physician from Philadelphia and one of three Kern brothers who had accompanied Frémont on his ill-fated survey. In fact, in a complete collection of primary accounts of the events, Leroy Hafen's *Frémont's Fourth Expedition*, a nearly exact copy of the letter appears reproduced, in full from beginning to end. The letter was identified as "Benjamin Kern's Letter to Joe." Though this revelation raised a host of new questions, it confirmed the identification of the letter. Given that the letter was authentic, and all initial evidence seemed to indicate it was, then Benjamin Kern had written this document as a letter home on February 20, 1849, from Taos, New Mexico, following his escape from the cold mountains and the disaster that claimed Frémont's Fourth.

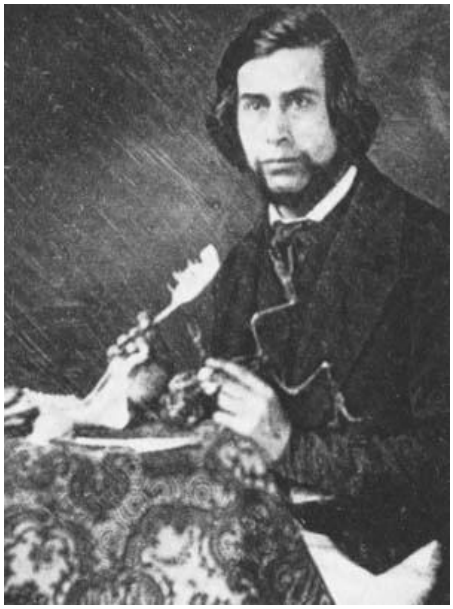

Fig. 10. Benjamin Jordan Kern

Fig. 11. John Kern III

One of nine children, Benjamin Jordan Kern was born to John Kern III and Mary Elizabeth Bignell Kern on August 3, 1818, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. John Kern III,

the son of a German immigrant who fought alongside Washington at Valley Forge, was quite successful as a customs collector at the Port of Philadelphia. Growing up at 37 Crown St., the sons of John Kern III attended the Franklin Institute, a museum and high school for applied sciences a mere seven blocks from their home. While all of the Kern brothers were naturalists and scientists at heart, most were drawn toward art. Family offices and an art studio were established at 62 Filbert Street in downtown Philadelphia. Benjamin, on the other hand, became passionate about medicine, receiving his degree from the Pennsylvania Medical College. Affectionately referred to as "Doc," Benjamin quickly became acquainted with the Philadelphia intellectual elite, the first of his brothers to earn membership in the Academy of Natural Sciences. The Kerns had "frequent contacts with important local scientists like Joseph Leidy and Joseph Carson."[13] Edward and Richard began to experience relative success as artists, even replacing their mentor, William Mason, at the Franklin Institute as the school's principle art teachers.[14] Yet the Kern children, were quickly overshadowed by the youngest, Edward Meyer Kern. In 1845, at the ripe age of twenty-three, Edward was chosen among dozens of candidates to replace Charles Preuss as artist on John C. Frémont's Third Expedition, marking the beginning of a long and tenuous relationship between the Kern brothers and the "Pathfinder."[15]

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[13] Robert V. Hine, "The Kern Brothers and the Image of the West." *Desert Magazine*, October 1961: 21

[14] Jeffrey A. Cohen, "Building a Discipline: Early Institutional Settings for Architectural Education in Philadelphia, 1804-1890." *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (Society of Architectural Historians) 53, no. 2 (June 1994): 155.

[15] All of the Kern family information came from genealogical notes made by Helen Wolfe, a great-niece of the Kern brothers. Some Kern Notes, HM 31541:1-2, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

Fig. 12. Drawing by Richard Kern of the Kern family's three story home

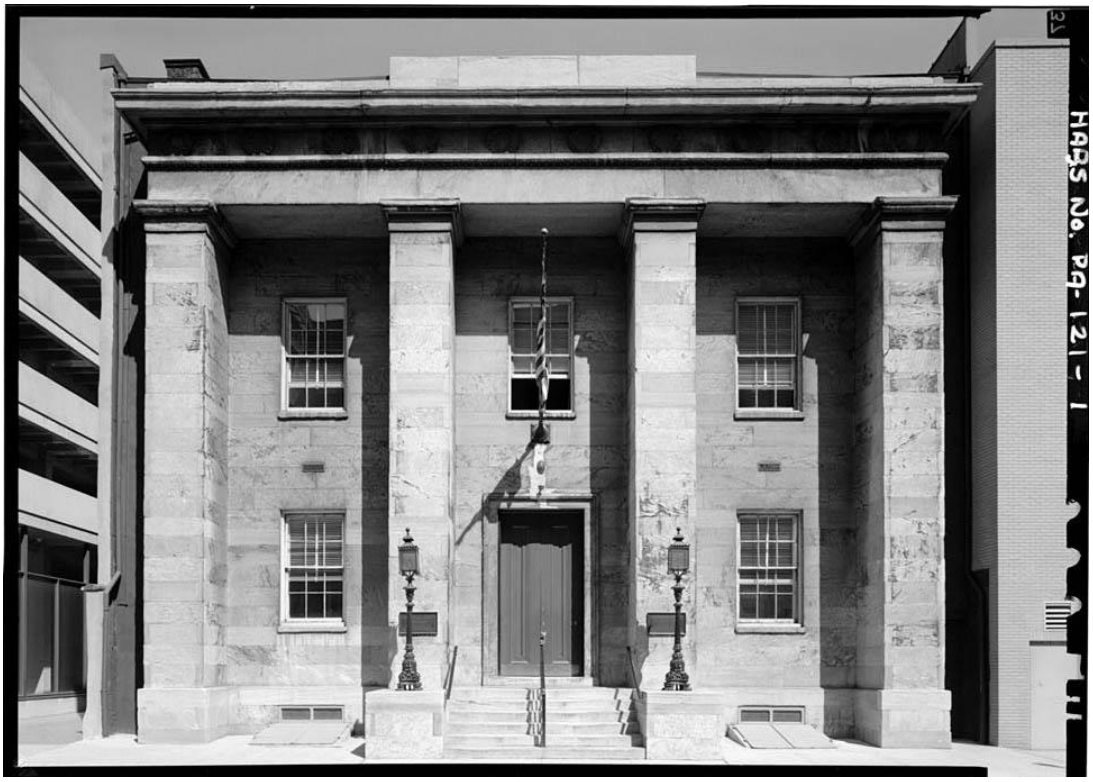


Fig. 13. Photograph of the old Franklin Institute, now the Atwater-Kent Museum

Frémont initially wrote of Edward Kern: "He was, besides an accomplished artist; his skill in sketching from nature and accurately drawing and coloring birds and plants made him a valuable accession to the expedition."[16] In the spring of 1845, Benjamin Kern accompanied his brother to St. Louis, from where the expedition was to depart. Scholars have deduced that Edward was epileptic and often subject to episodes of illness. It can be assumed that Benjamin, being the protective older brother and expert in medicine, saw Edward off for this reason. Despite being so young, the rugged mountain men took to Edward, as he became the topographer of the expedition under the study of Frémont himself. William Bucknell, a Santa Fe trader, wrote of Edward, "the hilarity and sociability of this gentleman often contributed to disperse the gloomy images which very naturally presented themselves on a journey of such uncertainty and adventure."[17]

Fig. 14. Edward Kern, oil painting by Richard H. Kern, in the collections of the Smithsonian Institute

[16] Spindt, Herman Adolph. *Notes on the Life of Edward M. Kern* (Bakersfield: Kern County Historical Society, 1939), 5.

[17] R.L. Duffus, *The Santa Fe Trail* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), 78.

The expedition, which consisted of fifty-five men led by the infamous Kit Carson, quickly reached the Arkansas River. Though their goal was to explore the source of the river, Frémont abandoned their objective. The expedition would make haste for California, where rumblings of war were growing louder between settlers and the Mexican government.[18] Possibly, they believed that California was soon to be won and to participate would not only be a worthwhile adventure, but secure a portion of the frontier for themselves. Upon arrival in the Sacramento Valley, Frémont left Edward in charge of Fort Sutter while he and a majority of the men from the expedition would travel south, engaging Mexican forces on the heels of "Bear Flag Revolution" and the Mexican-American War. Edward believed Frémont's party greatly influenced the outcome: "Had the revolutionists been left to themselves, a few weeks would have settled the business by defeating themselves."[19] Frémont had quickly come to favor Edward, as did those who served with him. As commander of Fort Sutter, Ned conducted raids on nearby Indian villages and even dispensed relief aid to the survivors of the Donner Party. Glad to be away from "civilization and brandy," Ned often wrote home to his brothers with wild tales of his military command, Indians, and the like.[20] Edward Kern was rapturous with the freedom of the frontier and having remarkable success through his relationship with John C. Frémont. Meanwhile, the Kern brothers waited at home in Philadelphia, envious of their youngest sibling and aching to stretch their legs.

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[18] Frémont would later write in his memoirs, "A grand opportunity now presented itself to realize in their fullest extend the farsighted views of Senator Benton, and make the Pacific Ocean the western boundary of the United States." Robert V. Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion* ( New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 28.

[19] Samuel C. Blessing, "Colorado Catastrophe." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* (Montana Historical Society) 11, no. 1 (Winter 1961): 13.

[20] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 19.

After the United States emerged victorious from the Mexican-American War, Commodore Stockton appointed John C. Frémont as military governor of California. A higher ranking officer, Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny ordered Frémont to step down from the position and allow Kearny to replace him in the hierarchy.[21] Frémont stubbornly refused and after a lengthy dispute, Frémont was court-martialed, tried, and convicted of mutiny. In his final words to the court, Frémont, referring to California, said, "I could return to it, after this trial is over, without rank or guards."[22] Though President Polk openly agreed with the court's decision, he immediately commuted Frémont's sentence. Frémont later wrote to Polk, demanding that his conviction be over-turned. Having received no reply, Frémont resigned his commission in the military.[23] He was offered numerous jobs, including a railroad executive position that paid over five thousand dollars salary, though he turned them all down.[24] Desperate to restore Frémont and the Benton family's reputation, Thomas Hart Benton and Frémont began planning a fourth, dramatic expedition to finally realize their dreams of Manifest Destiny and a transcontinental railroad.

Unable to serve as a witness in Frémont's trial, Edward returned home to Philadelphia and enjoyed relative fame. He continued work with his brother, Richard, at the Franklin Institute and their studio at 62 Filbert Street. Both Richard and Edward joined Benjamin in the Academy of Natural Sciences, often receiving patronage from local scientists, sketching for publications. As the Kerns enjoyed professional success in

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[21] Brandon, *The Men and the Mountain*, 26-27.

[22] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 52.

[23] Brandon, *The Men and the Mountain*, 32-33.

[24] Andrew Rolle, *John Charles Frémont : Character as Destiny* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 112.

Philadelphia, Frémont and Benton were busy plotting their return to greatness. Benton successfully passed legislation through the Senate appropriating thirty thousand dollars for a fourth Frémont expedition that would survey a railroad route through the Rocky Mountains along the 38th parallel. Unfortunately for Frémont, the measure was voted down in the House of Representatives by a margin of one-hundred twenty-eight to twenty-nine.[25] Frémont had already borrowed a great deal of money to purchase a home in California for his wife and his newborn son, but without federal funding, a heroic expedition to his new estate would prove difficult.[26] Benton again came to Frémont's aid, securing investment for the expedition from three St. Louis merchants. Benton had, no doubt, sold the businessmen on his notion of a great American empire founded upon the ability to trade efficiently with China and the East.[27] With financial backing, and the urgency of competition from alternative routes for the railroad, Frémont began recuiting members for the expedition.

In less than a year, thirty-three men were hired for the expedition. Half were inexperienced greenhorns, while the others were "children of the mountains" who had served on previous Frémont expeditions.[28] Frémont had traveled to Philadelphia with artist and topographer Charles Preuss to recruit the Kerns. With unsurprising success, Frémont again recruited Edward Kern, who also convinced his brothers, Benjamin and Richard, to join. While in Philadelphia, Frémont was said to have purchased medical

[25] Rolle, *John Charles Frémont*, 112.

[26] Brandon, *The Men and the Mountain*, 35.

[27] Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire*, 266.

[28] Brandon, *The Men and the Mountain*, 39. Patricia Joy Richmond, *Trail to Disaster* (Denver: Colorado Historical Society, 1990), 1.

equipment, possibly in consultation with Benjamin, for the purposes of amputating limbs. Before departing Philadelphia, Richard Kern wrote in his sister Mary's album the following lines:

> When to the land where the citron flowers blooming,
> the swan speeds his southwardly flight
> When the red of the evening in the far west is sinking
> And though the deep woods steal the shadows of night,
> Then doth my heart with deep grief complain
> That never, ah never shall I see thee again.
> Parting, ah parting, parting gives pain.[29]

Yet, none of the three brothers had wives or children of their own, and thus they were susceptible to the call of the frontier. Frémont's Philadelphia acquisitions, the Kerns and amputation tools, foreshadowed the horrors to come for the fourth Frémont expedition and the Kern family.

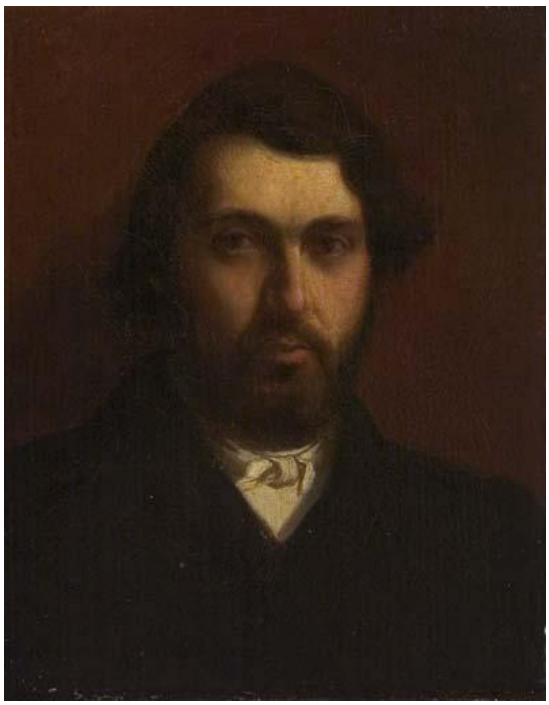

Fig. 15. Richard Kern, oil painting by Edward Kern, in collections of the Smithsonian Institute.

[29] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 53.

In October of 1848, John Kern accompanied his three youngest brothers to St. Louis, specifically Westport, where they would again begin their journey.[30] Among these fellow travelers were men that Edward Kern, a veteran himself of the third expedition, knew quite well: Henry King, Alexis Godey, Charles Preuss, Tom Breckenridge, Lorenzo Vincenthaler, Charley Taplin, Andrew Cathcart, Frederick Creutzfeldt, and of course, John Charles Frémont.[31] While the Kerns had few distractions that kept them from embarking westward, Frémont's first son died a few days prior on a steamboat on the Mississippi. Jessie Benton Frémont, who was to rejoin her husband in California later the following year, had clung to her son's body, refusing to give him to her husband to bury along the riverbank.[32] Another expedition member, Henry King, was married just weeks before the departure. In that Benton and the expedition had failed to secure funding for the trip, financial means were scarce and men were not paid for their work. Many historians have suggested that Frémont may have promised payment at the end of the trip, indicating his confidence in his own wild success.[33] While Frémont had previously prohibited men under his command from keeping their own accounts of events through journals, without payment, the freedom to record the trip became a recruiting tool. The Kerns would seize this opportunity, creating the most detailed and reliable accounts of the trip.[34]

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[30] It was unusual to depart so late in the year; typically expeditions embarked in the spring. Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 53.

[31] Ibid, 53. There is some dispute the total number on the expedition – some accounts say thirty-four men, while others say thirty-five.

[32] Rolle, *John Charles Frémont*, 113.

[33] Brandon, *The Men and the Mountain*, 47.

[34] Hafen , *Frémont's Fourth Expedition*.

Immediately after departing from Westport, the Kerns became disenchanted with their hero and leader, as the three brothers were relegated to the most menial tasks. Benjamin and Frémont had a particular clash of personalities. Robert V. Hine wrote, "[Benjamin] had been hired as doctor of the expedition, and Ned must have told him that on any such western safari the specialists, particularly the doctors, were not subject to the routine chores of camp – did not have to gather wood or saddle mules or stand guard." Despite these expectations, Ben was frequently assigned to these duties. While others would later remark that the Kerns openly resented this treatment, their journals hardly gave any indication of bitter feelings toward Frémont. But focused on the scientific potential of the journey, their journals from the earliest days of the expedition were full of descriptive notes on clouds, rocks, and plants. None the less, the bulky scientific equipment, "surveying instruments, cans and kegs for pressing and collection, alcohol for a preservative," and such weighed heavily upon the three brothers.[35]

Though the group had one seasoned guide in Alexis Godey, he believed his knowledge of passes across the Rocky Mountains was inadequate. Similar to previous trips, Frémont had planned to pick up a guide along the way.[36] Stopping at the small outpost of Pueblo, Colorado, Frémont found his man in Old Bill Williams.[37] Old Bill was a particularly enigmatic character – a battle-worn, drunken gambler who rode his mule jockey-style with the stirrups high, dressed in buckskin and Shoshone face paint.[38] In

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[35] Robert V. Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 54.

[36] Ibid, 56.

[37] Patricia J. Richmond, *Trail to Disaster* (Denver: Colorado Historical Society, 1990), 4.

[38] Steve Howe, "Frémont's Wrong Turn" *Backpacker*, May 1994: 37.

Pueblo, numerous men were said to have turned down the job, as white men and Native Americans alike warned of an unusually harsh winter with deep snow in the mountain passes.[39] Their predictions proved accurate.

Fig. 16. "Spanish Peaks from Our Camp" by Richard Kern, November 17, 1848, in the private collection of Fred Cron.

As early as November 3, the party encountered driving snow while crossing the Arkansas River. On the western side of Pueblo, the snow-covered Spanish Peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Range, which the local Indians called the "Breasts of the World," first became visible. Upon their appearance, numerous men abandoned the expedition, fearing the enormous difficulty of successfully making the pass in such weather.[40] In fact, the men and the mules began to suffer from the extreme conditions, with many looking "like old Time or Winter – icicles an inch long were pendant from our moustache

[39] Frémont wrote his wife; "Both Indians and whites report the snow to be deeper in the mountains than has for a long time been known so early in the season. They predict a severe winter. … Still I am in no wise discouraged by the prospect and I believe we shall succeed in forcing our way across." Rolle, *John Charles Frémont*, 114.

[40] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 56.

and beard."[sic][41] Pushing on, Frémont and Williams would cross the Sangre de Cristos at Robidoux's Pass, conquering the first major obstacle of their journey.

Looking from the Spanish Peaks, the valley of the Rio Grande appeared before them, promising what appeared to be a flat stretch of land free of snow and ice. This would serve as a great relief to their mules, which were bordering on starvation on the barren peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Range.[42] Yet, as the men descended to the valley, they came to find that it was merely the tips of tall grass protruding from a deep, deep snow.[43] Crossing this valley would take days, exhausting the men and their caravan of over one-hundred-twenty mules. As they approached a major tributary of the Rio Grande, the most daunting portion of their journey laid before them, the San Juan Range of the Rocky Mountains. Before mounting their ascent, Ben remarked "all very tired."[44]

Planning their approach, an argument arose between Old Bill and Frémont. While accounts of this conflict vary, it appears that Old Bill Williams encouraged either a more northernly route or one to the South of the range. Frémont, on the other hand, desired to stay as close as possible to the 38th parallel. Thomas Breckinridge, who shared a bed with Bill, later confirmed this account of the predicament. Old Bill wrote, "I wanted to go one way and Frémont will go another, and right here our troubles will commence."[45] Whoever was responsible, the path decided upon spelled disaster for the expedition.

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[41] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 56.

[42] Richmond, *Trail to Disaster*, 8-9.

[43] Charles Preuss, *Exploring with Frémont; the Private Diaries of Charles Preuss*, Translated by Erwin G.. and Elisabeth K. Gudde. Norman: Oklahoma, 1958, 145.

[44] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 57.

[45] Ibid.

Divisions began to arise within the party, as their path became more arduous, food supplies became increasingly limited, and mules began to drop left and right.

Fig. 17. ”Killing Mules,” drawing by Frederic Remington in Cosmopolitan magazine. Remington created as series of works based on and accompanying Thomas Breckinridge’s account of the disaster.

The loss of a mule was not merely a loss of the animal, but also a loss of luggage or mode of transportation. This left many men walking, and as Colonel Frémont would not leave valuable instruments behind, hauling heavy packs of gear. The snow reached the elbows of the men, and without snow shoes, men’s stockings froze to their feet. The Kerns, as scientists, naturalists, and artists, had some of the more cumbersome packs – ornithological collections, books, and botanical specimens. While some historians suggest that the Kerns were subject to unfair treatment by the party, others believe the Kerns felt themselves above the labor of the expedition, dramatically slowing the rest of

the party.[46] The Kerns became irritated with Frémont's stubborn ambition. Richard wrote of their leader, "with the willfully blind eyes of rashness and self-conceit and confidence he pushed on."

Nonetheless, through sheer determination, Frémont reached the peak, but with decimated supplies and deflated men. At this point in the story of Frémont's Fourth, the moment when the most severe suffering began, the Kern letter fragment in the Mayborn Museum collections begins, vividly recounting the distress experienced over the next month.

> When on the top the snow dust so plenty that we could see nothing else. Some of the men sat on the stones and began to freeze others became blind It required the full energy of the remainder to turn camp back again on the trail to our former resting place which we happily reached all alive but many frost bitten. [sic][47]

After having remained encamped on the summit for five days, at what the men dubbed "Camp Dismal," Frémont saw the expedition "overtaken by sudden and inevitable ruin."[48] This ruin, Frémont believed, was bad morale, as men came to fear for their lives. Certainly, twenty degrees below zero had a dramatic effect.[49] On the morning of December 18, Benjamin "waked up and found 8 inches snow on my bed peeped out and told Dick the expedition was destroyed and if we all got to some settlement with our lives we would be doing well."[sic][50] Mules began eating each other's manes and the luggage upon each other's backs – sustenance to which the men themselves would soon resort. By Christmas, the snow-blind men had all but given up. In light of the circumstances,

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[46] Roberts, *A Newer World*, 238.

[47] Benjamin Kern Letter, BU-MMC.

[48] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 58.

[49] Richmond, *Trail to Disaster*, 18.

[50] Benjamin Kern Letter, BU-MMC.

Frémont became convinced that a retreat and relief party became necessary if they were to escape the mountains alive.[51]

Dispatching four of his strongest men, Old Bill Williams, Henry King, Thomas Breckinridge, and Creutzfeldt, Frémont hoped that the relief party would reach a settlement and return with aid to rescue the expedition. The nearest settlement was that of Albiquiu, New Mexico, an old Indian outpost some one hundred sixty miles away. The Mayborn's Kern letter corroborates this distance as well as the stories surrounding the relief party. Despite packing light, the four men became so fatigued and starved that they were forced to remove their boots, cut up the leather, and boil it down to a paste for survival. In order to proceed, the men wrapped blankets around their bloody, frost-bitten feet, leaving a crimson trail behind. Within a few days they were reduced to crawling, and Henry King, the newlywed, passed away from the cold and starvation.

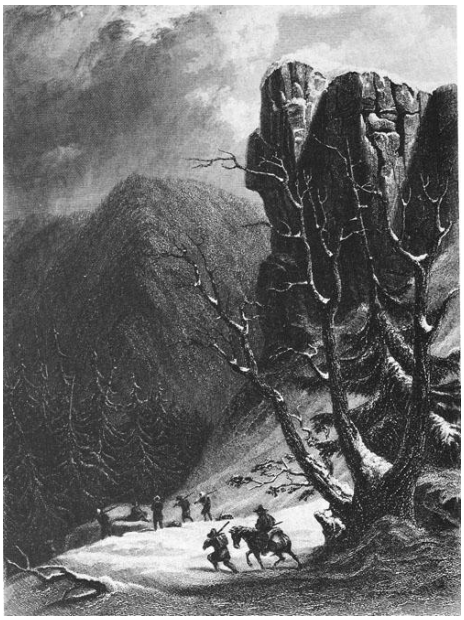

Fig. 18. Engraving inspired by a sketch by either Edward or Richard Kern

Meanwhile, Frémont ordered that all the baggage be carried back to the river, to

[51] Richmond, *Trail to Disaster*, 23-24.

await relief. By this point the Kerns required assistance with their packs.[52] As the "expedition slipped back toward the valley, it broke into segments like a frayed rope."[53] The stronger messes of men led the way, while the weakest groups fell behind. Ralph Proux, a Frenchman who had visited the Kern home in Philadelphia just a few months prior, was among the first to fall. As his comrades fell from exhaustion, Ned wrote that he came to look on death "with as little sympathy as I would have done had they been dogs. Twill be my turn soon, poor fellow he has but a few hours start of me, or he was a good man." These were the only words the dejected men could offer to those lost.

As men began to die, surviving journals and diaries began to cast blame upon other members of the expedition. Ben wrote, "from reason or rather no reason and to which circumstance every death is due the mules were left on the hill and thus months of good provision sacrificed."[54] By January 11, Frémont had received no word from his relief party, and believing that they must have met their own share of crises, he set out to rescue the first rescue party with Alexis Godey and three others.[55] Frémont left behind a startling note to his men, stating that he was to wait for them in Taos, but that they must hurry, or else he will have left them for California. Leaving Lorenzo Vincenthaler in charge, the remaining men splintered into factions and eventually disband altogether, with the strongest men sneaking out of camp at night, deserting the weak. The Indians who had been accompanying the Kerns also fled for fear that they would be subject to

[52] Richmond, *Trail to Disaster*, 25.

[53] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 59.

[54] Benjamin Kern Letter, BU-MMC.

[55] Richmond, *Trail to Disaster*, 35.

cannibalism.[56] Among the weakest were the Kern brothers, worn from the most tedious of jobs and heavy baggage – "here commenced the severest of our suffering."[57]

Fig. 19. "King Lays Down" by Frederic Remington depicts the scene recalled by Breckenridge when Henry King could no longer continue.

While the main party had disbanded into chaos and despair, Frémont's advance party came upon the camp of the first relief party that had consisted of King, Williams, Breckinridge, and Creutzfeldt. They found three of the men, miserable and near death, with one already having passed away. Judging from the state of the camp, and the dead body of King, the men had apparently been feeding upon the body of their lost companion.[58] Frémont pulled the men onto mules, eventually having the good fortune of running across a Ute Indian, who through force or altruism helped re-supply the group of men. With the help of the Utes, the eight men were able to reach Taos, barely alive.

[56] Richmond, *Trail to Disaster*, 41-42.

[57] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 60.

[58] Preuss, *Exploring with Frémont*, 149.

While Frémont and the other men rested, Alexis Godey heroically gathered supplies, without a moment of rest, and returned to attempt to rescue the main party.[59] While the first of the men had reached civilization, the others continued to toil, snow-blind, frost-bitten, and starved in the mountains to the north.

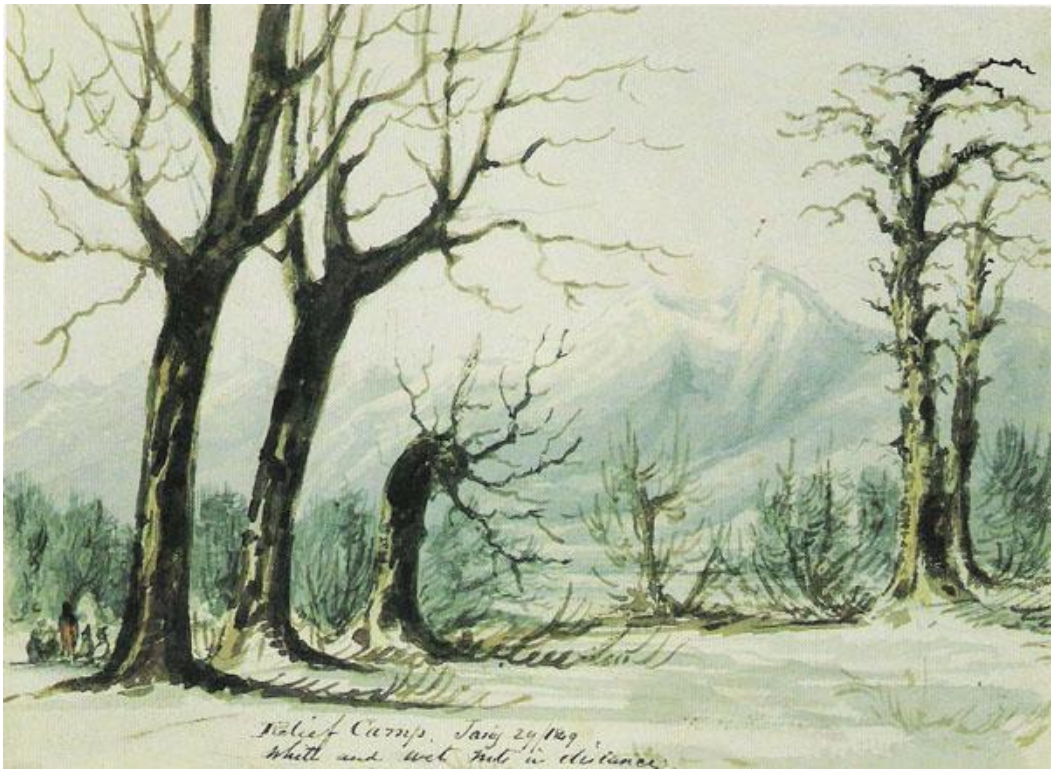

Fig. 20. Relief Camp, January 29, 1849, by Richard Kern. Watercolor in the collections of the Amon Carter Museum, Ft. Worth, Texas.

Having been deserted, the Kerns and the group of weaker men, set up in camp, apathetic, awaiting death or whatever their fate may have been. Benjamin became terribly ill: "I became gradually the weakest of all. One day I laid down the shades of death were stealing gradually over me the others covered me with their blankets, there I lay till near sundown when I made an effort to arise, crawled to my sack and took out 3 or 4 inches lash rope, found a spoonful of sweet oil in my pocket with which I annointed the

[59] Richmond, *Trail to Disaster*, 43-44.

rope and then ate it, next morning felt somewhat refreshed."[60] The men awoke with their blankets frozen to the ground, covered by feet of snow. Unable to walk, the men crawled about from fallen log to fallen log, lighting fires and burning the luggage to keep alive.

By late January of 1849, ten men from various factions of the original expedition party had died from starvation and cold. Then, on January 28, salvation came. "During a snow storm as we all sat silently around our little willow fire Taplin suddenly exclaimed by God there is a halloo Tis but a wolf again we said – rising to his feet he said Christ there is a man on horseback over the river – we gave a shout to be sure. Almost in an instant Alexis Godey was with us – Well boys I am dam-ned glad to find you alive. He then pulled some bread from his pockets. Oh he has bread we cried and some of us trembled with joy at the sight of it."[sic][61] The Kerns were saved, and while some suggested that there was some providence in their rescue, Godey sarcastically responded "Hell, twas good management."[62]

The Kerns, along with some of the other men, placed the blame for the disaster at the feet of Frémont. Frémont and the majority of the men left the Kerns, Williams, Stepperfeldt, and Cathcart behind in Taos. Frémont would later write of the expedition, "the result was entirely satisfactory. It convinced me that neither the snow or winder not the mountain ranges were obstacles in the way of the road."[63] The road he referred to was, of course, the transcontinental railroad proposed along the 38th parallel. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Frémont stubbornly held fast to Benton's dream and his hope for

[60] Benjamin Kern Letter, BU-MMC.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Egan, Ferol. *Frémont, Explorer For A Restless Nation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 476.

[63] John Moring, *Men with Sand: Great Explorers of the North American West* (Helena: TwoDot, 1998), 181.

redemption among Washington elites and the American public. Any problems encountered, the Bentons and Frémonts blamed on Old Bill Williams: "the error of our journey was committed in engaging this man," "a passport to disaster," "in starving times no man who knew him ever walked in front of Bill Williams."[64] The Kerns, in turn, blamed Frémont. In a furious letter Edward Kern wrote:

> He had broken faith with all of us … when out we found our situation suddenly changed from what we had start for to that of mulateers each with his number of packs and whatever work in his particular branch might turn up besides. This you must believe was somewhat cutting to our dignity – not that any of us were unwilling to assist in any work if necessity required it – but this was not the case. You know too that flattery is certainly not apart of a Kern more particularly of Dicks or Bens. So that put a damper on their prospects. Natures more illy suited could not well have been thrown together. This is the principal reason on part of F. (who loves to be told of his greatness)… Another amiable weakness he has, that of believing the reports of the meanest in his camp. Hardly one time has he treated us with the respect due our situation or ourselves, and jealous of anyone who may know as much or more of any subject than himself (for he delights to associate among those who should be his inferiors – which may in some measure account for the reputation he has gained of being, for a man of his talents so excessively modest. A thing by the by which many adopt to hide their want of depth.) he very naturally begat a dislike to Doc. And took no small pleasure at showing it to others, with who good sense and the behavior belonging to the character of a gentleman should have forbidden him holding converse on such subjects. [sic][65]

In the same letter, Edward wrote that Benjamin had intended to return to the mountains with Old Bill to retrieve the cached luggage left behind at Proulx Creek. Without the money to return home, the Kerns were stranded in Taos, awaiting return of their brother with their possessions. Having heard nothing from Benjamin or Old Bill by April, Richard and Edward began to suspect that the two had encountered problems, possibly an Indian attack. Their assumptions proved correct; both Old Bill Williams and Benjamin Kern were murdered by Utah Indians.

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[64] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 62.

[65] Ibid, 63-64.

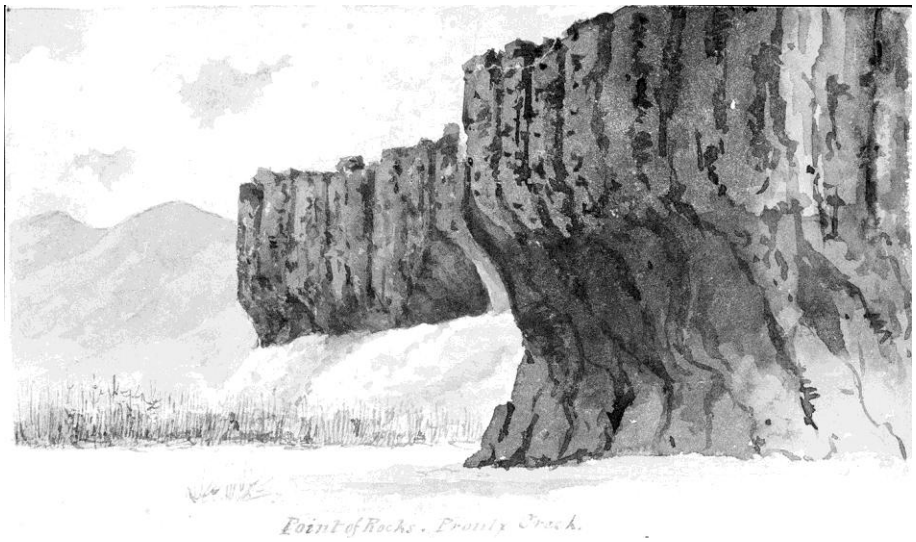


Fig. 21. “Point of Rocks on Proulx Creek” by Richard Kern

Fig. 22. “On Proulx’ Creek Chowatch Mts.,NM, 1849” by Richard Kern, watercolor in the collections of the Amon Carter Museum, Ft. Worth, Texas. Both images, figures 21 and 22, show the point where the expedition had cached their supplies and where Benjamin was killed. Figure 21, the latter of the two, romanticizes the scene with three figures at the base of the cliffs. Undoubtedly these are the three Kern brothers.

Stranded in Taos with no money and mourning the loss of his brother, Edward Kern wrote "I have lost a start that I never expect to recover again."[66] Though scholars have debated whether Benjamin and Old Bill were killed by Indians or the Mexican muleteers they had hired, attempts to retrieve Benjamin's body failed. The cache of enormous monetary, scientific, and historical value was lost, split piece-meal across the rugged Southwest. Thomas Breckenridge, a surviving member of the initial relief party, left at least $1200 worth of gold in the mountains. Frémont promised to Breckenridge to "see that the loss is made up to you" but no such efforts were made on the part of Frémont.[67] Heartbroken and penniless, Richard and Edward would not return home, but eventually found work among other expeditions as artists and topographers. Richard would later write to Dr. Samuel Morton, "I cannot in justice, speak of events without tracing them to their causes, and as I would handle the subject ungloved, it would ultimately lead to personal consequences."[68]

Frémont arrived in California to find his place in state politics as one of the first U.S. Senators from the state and later as the first presidential candidate of the Republican Party. The Kerns would continue their grudge against Frémont, with Richard's diary being published during Frémont's presidential campaign in 1856.[69] Unfortunately, Richard had met the same fate as his elder brother, Benjamin, dying by Indian arrows in 1853 while serving on the Gunnison Expedition. Edward went on to live a comparatively long life, traveling across the world, and finally settling back in his hometown and art

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[66] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, 68.

[67] Rolle, *John Charles Frémont*, 119.

[68] Hafen, *Frémont's Fourth Expedition*, 249.

[69] Roberts, *A Newer World*, 244.

studio in Philadelphia. Edward died at his home in 1863 at the age of forty-one.[70] Before their deaths, both Edward and Richard reconciled with Frémont. James H. Simpson wrote to Richard regarding the strained relationship with Frémont: "I am glad you and Frémont have become reconciled to each other. There can be no doubt that he has done great injustice to individuals in his public career, but the first step toward improvement is to confess error, and as he seems to have done this in your case, there is hope that this experience will not be lost upon him."[71]

The Kern brothers were but examples of well-educated individuals who were drawn westward. To many artists in the northeast, "the West was attractive to Romantics for one reason, because it was still little enough known to be subject to legend." Most drew from their imagination creating exultant images of soaring landscapes and idealized native forms. The Kerns, on the other hand, criticized the common depiction of Indians as "Grecian youths," describing the women instead as "up and down like a plank-board." Richard Kern wrote that other artists looked at his work "with veneration because I've seen such places."[72] The Kerns had gathered a fair amount of work sketching for local scientists, drawing accurate depictions of bones, plants, and various living creatures. Though these works were generally uncredited, the Kerns were well-respect amongst the scientific community.

Romantics held a sentimental view of the west as a return to nature, and though Philadelphian scientists did the same, they conducted their visions with accuracy rather

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[70] Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary, 1840-1865* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 346 – 349.

[71] Rolle, *John Charles Frémont*, 122

[72] The three quotes come from Robert V. Hine, "The Kern Brothers and the Image of the West." *Desert Magazine*, October 1961: 22.

than hyperbole. Philadelphia's scientific and artistic community was unique, in that during this era, "the artist and the scientist performed interchangeable functions."[73] Robert V. Hine, an author of numerous articles and books on the Kern brothers, wrote: "Their sketches in the field may have been realistic and topographic, but, with a flute and poetry in their knapsack, the brothers' lives were pure Byron."[74] With their unique artistic approach, the Kern brothers now have works in the collections of the Amon Carter Museum, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, The Gilcrease Museum, Yale's Beinecke Library, Huntington Library, and the Smithsonian Institution.[75] Emanuel Leutze placed Edward Kern as the central character in his mural in the United States Capitol "Westward Ho!" or "Westerward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way." [76] John Mix Stanley, a notable artist of the frontier, worked from many of the Kern's unfinished sketches and drawings.[77] Dozens of geographical landmarks and locations are named for the Kerns throughout the western states.[78] The three Kern brothers were extraordinarily talented individuals of great achievements, particularly for having died so young. Had they lived longer, they would have no doubt had an even more profound impact upon the history of the West and the study of natural sciences in America.

After decades with the Baylor University Museum, the "Mystery Letter" has been identified as a unique and controversial piece of evidence of Western Americana. Few

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[73] David J. Weber, *Richard H. Kern: Expeditionary Artist in the Far Southwest,1848-1853* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 29.

[74] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expansion*, vii-viii.

[75] Palmquist and Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West*, 349.

[76] Some Kern Notes, Huntington Library. Brandon, *The Men and the Mountain*, 54.

[77] Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire*, 215.

[78] Brandon, *The Men and the Mountain*, 59.

governments had ever "allocated national resources in men and material so unambiguously dedicated to long-range social considerations."[79] The Frémont Expeditions and the Kern brothers were certainly products of this investment. Not only does the Kern letter serve as a deep connection to the artist-naturalist-explorers who shaped the frontier, but it also serves as reminder of the sort of treasures that are lost and waiting within the collection of the Mayborn, and all museum collections alike. While a former curator had commented that the letter had resided on his desk unidentified for at least ten years, modern research tools had opened the possibility for the letter's classification. But as with all museum objects, merely understanding what the artifact is, is not enough. The provenance, authenticity, history as a museum object, relevance to the museum's mission and scope, and potential uses of the Kern letter must all be carefully considered before any decisions may be made regarding the letter's future with the Mayborn Museum.

[79] Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire*, 231.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## John Kern Strecker and the Baylor University Museum

Though the Mayborn Museum Complex has diverse collections, it is unusual that an object of such historical significance be found, virtually undocumented. Nonetheless, the Mayborn has an enormous collection full of mysterious objects, the majority of which were acquired when the museum was known as the Strecker Museum. The Strecker Museum, one of the oldest museums in the state of Texas, had previously been housed in the basement of the Sid Richardson Building, among other buildings on Baylor University's campus. In 2003, with the completion of a much larger new facility, the Strecker Museum moved to the north across University Parks Avenue, re-christened as the Mayborn Museum. Despite the change in name and location, the collection remained the same. As the most significant figure in the history of the museum and the man responsible for collecting a large portion of the collection, perhaps the best way to understand the Kern letter is through John Kern Strecker, the former namesake of the institution and curator of the Baylor University Museum from 1903 until his death in 1933.

John Kern Strecker, Jr., great-nephew to the Kern brothers of the Frémont Expedition, was born in Waterloo, Illinois, on July 10, 1875.[1] Strecker spent most of his childhood in Fort Scott, Kansas, where he developed an interest in ornithology. Though Strecker had little formal education, he would flourish as a naturalist. His father moved the family to Waco, Texas, in 1887 to begin work with Wells-Gooch Monument Works.

[1] Brent A. Brown, "A History of the Strecker Museum, 1857-1968" (Master's thesis, Baylor University, 1976), 13.

Strecker struck up relationships with local collectors and naturalists, establishing himself as an expert on local fauna.[2] In 1903, at the age of twenty-eight, Strecker was hired as curator of the Baylor University Museum. Under his direction, the museum would become one of the premier institutions of its kind in the region, with Strecker publishing numerous volumes of scientific works as an emerging leader in the study of Texas natural history. Strecker would also take on the role of university librarian, building the beginnings of what was known as the Texas Collection. A jovial and charismatic man, Strecker counted some of Texas's most influential men as friends, not the least of which were Baylor Presidents Samuel P. Brooks and Pat M. Neff. Among the museum's collections are thousands of letters of professional correspondence, large scrapbooks, dozens of personal possessions, and his private library – most of which remain uncataloged. In his thirty-year career with Baylor, Strecker made an indelible impact upon the university, Waco, and the museum.

Fig. 23 Photograph of John Kern Strecker in the field sporting his tie, boots, and hat.

[2] Brown, "A History of the Strecker Museum, 1857-1968," 13.

Little was published about Strecker's personal background or family history during his lifetime, but the Strecker family was considered to be among the scientific elite in nineteenth-century America.[3] Beginning with Ferdinand Strecker, who emigrated from Wurttemberg, Germany, in 1831, the Streckers were men of diverse interests and skills.[4] A successful sculptor and architect, who trained under the great Italian sculptor Antonio Canova and the Dane, Thorvaldsen, Ferdinand was forced to flee Germany due to a religious dispute with his family.[5] Settling in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Ferdinand married Ann Kern, daughter of John Kern, a customs collector at the port of Philadelphia. Ferdinand, like the men in the Kern family, held a passion for the natural sciences and art, and would have likely known and befriended Edward, Richard, and Benjamin Kern.[6] Ferdinand made a living in America as a stone mason, specifically a marble cutter. In fact, Ferdinand had established his own marble works shop but a few blocks for the Kern family home and the family studio at Filbert Street. In 1846, Ferdinand moved the family to Reading, PA, just to the northwest of Philadelphia.[7] His notebooks, written in numerous languages, as well as a couple of business cards are in the collection of the Mayborn. Following his death in 1856, the eldest son who had apprenticed under his father, Herman, would take over the family business. But like his father, Herman

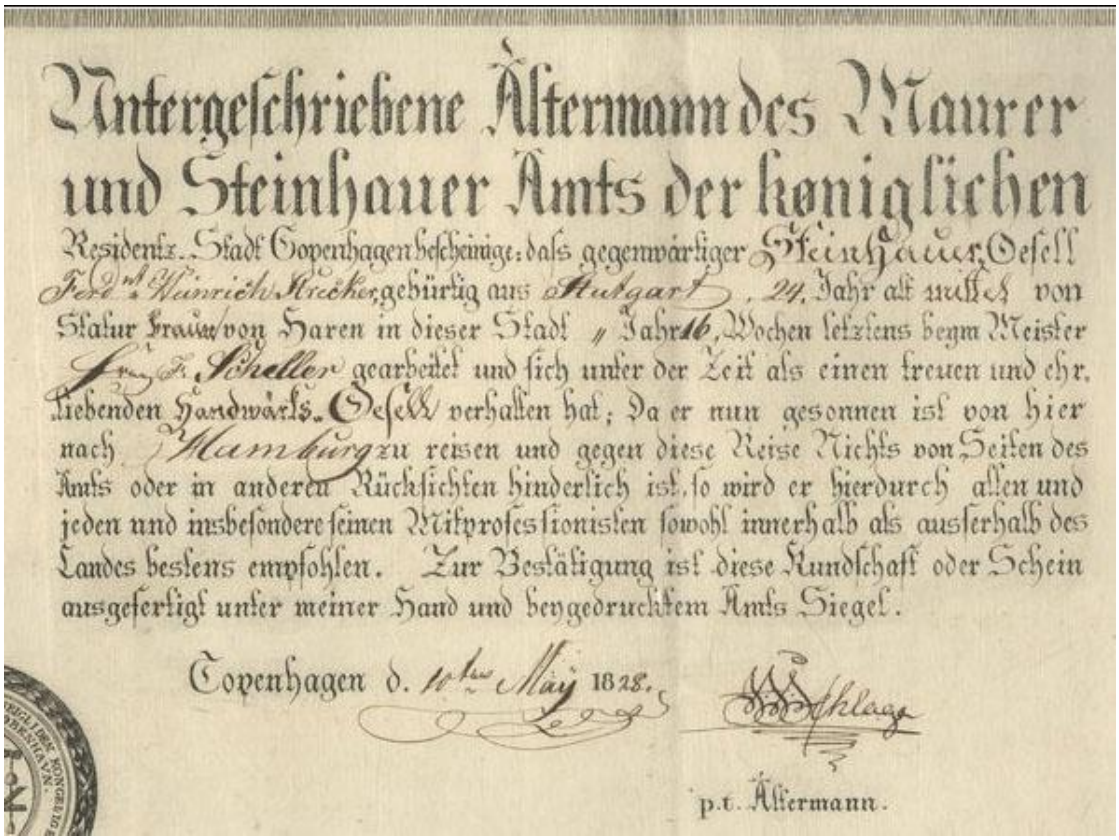
[3] In only one instance did anything written by or about John Kern Strecker during his lifetime indicate his relation to his famous uncles and great uncles.

[4] Ingrid Figueroa, "TheShipsList," RootsWeb, comment posted October 15, 2006, http:// archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/TheShipsList/2006-10/1160940942 (accessed April 14, 2009).

[5] Wilby T. Gooch, *A Baylor Man Born, a Baylor Man Bred; Autobiography and History* (Waco: Baylor University, 1965), 30. Milton W. Hamilton and E. L. Hettinger. "Dr. Herman Strecker - Artist and Scientist," *Historical Review of Berks County* (Berks County Historical Society) 11, no. 4 (1946): 98.

[6] Hamilton and Hamilton, "Dr. Herman Strecker", 99.

[7] Ibid, 98.



Untergeschriebene Altermann des Maurer und Steinhauer Amts der königlichen Residentz-Stadt Copenhagen bescheinige: dass gegenwärtiger Steinhauer Gesell Ferd.d Heinrich Strecker, gebürtig aus Stutgart, 24. Jahr alt mittel von Statur Frau von Haren in dieser Stadt 1 Jahr 16 Wochen letztens beym Meister Fr. Schneller gearbeitet und sich unter der Zeit als einen treuen und ehr. liebenden Handwerks-Gesell verhalten hat; Da er nun gesonnen ist von hier nach Hamburg zu reisen und gegen diese Reise Nichts von Seiten des Amts oder in anderen Rücksichten hinderlich ist, so wird er hierdurch allen und jeden und insbesondere seinen Mitprofessionisten sowohl innerhalb als ausserhalb des Landes bestens empfohlen. Zur Bestätigung ist diese Kundschaft oder Schein ausgefertigt unter meiner Hand und beygedrucktem Amts Siegel.

Copenhagen d. 10ten May 1828.

p.t. Altermann.

Fig. 24. This document was authored in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1828 certifying Ferdinand Strecker as a member of the Master Masonry and Carpenters Society. This document appeared on an online auction website with a starting bid of sixty dollars.

FERDINAND H. STRECKER'S
ORNAMENTAL
MARBLE WORKS,
RIDGE ROAD,
Between Buttonwood & Spring Garden Sts.,
West Side,
PHILADELPHIA.

Those of his fellow Citizens desirous of obtaining something handsome in the above line, are respectfully invited to call and view his finished work, as well as his large collection of designs for Monuments, Tombs, Headstones, Mantelpieces &c &c.

REFER TO:—Henry S. Patterson, M. D., No. 44 North 4th St.
Gen. George M. Keim, Marshall's Office, Statehouse.

Fig. 25. Business card for Ferdinand's first shop, BU-MMC.


Fig. 26. Emblem on envelope, BU-MMC.

Strecker was not content to merely make a living. Herman was consumed with art and science, eventually becoming one of the region's foremost naturalists.

In that Herman Strecker, like his brothers John and Lewis, had apprenticed for his father in the marble works shop, and thus had little to no formal education; yet, he had a voracious appetite for knowledge. In order to satisfy his eager mind, Herman began taking day trips to Philadelphia where he studied, with the permission of Joseph Leidy, in the library of the Academy of Natural Sciences.[8] Here, Herman would find his utmost love – entomology, specializing in butterflies. Perhaps under the influence of his maternal uncle, Edward Kern, Herman also became skilled at lithography. Saving every penny he could, Strecker bought a lithograph stone and began work on his first book. Continuing to save for sets of hundreds of bookplates, Strecker would travel back and forth to Philadelphia for printing and then clearing the stone for the next plate upon each return.[9] Though he could on afford to print 300 copies of the book, all sold quickly. Despite demand, no more copies were printed.[10] For the remainder of his life, Herman obsessively studied and collected butterflies from across the world. Becoming one of the world's leading lepidopterists, Herman would correspond with great scientific minds of the day, such as Titian Ramsey Peale and Spencer Baird, and others who shared his hobby, including Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia.[11] Strecker would publish a host of scientific publications with his artwork as illustrations. During his lifetime, he described

[8] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC. This scrapbook contained hundreds of newspaper clippings, photographs, and other media about John Kern Strecker. The book had apparently been put together by Mrs. Ruby Boyd Strecker and donated to the museum in 1962. It remains uncataloged.

[9] Hamilton and Hettinger, "Dr. Herman Strecker," 99.

[10] H. B. Weiss, "An Interview with Herman Strecker in 1887." *Journal of the New York Entomological Society* (New York Entomological Society) 61, no. 4 (December 1953): 204.

[11] Hamilton and Hettinger, "Dr. Herman Strecker," 100.

Fig. 27. Examples of Herman's work in Charles Evans Cemetary, Reading, PA.

Fig. 28. Bookplate engraved by Herman

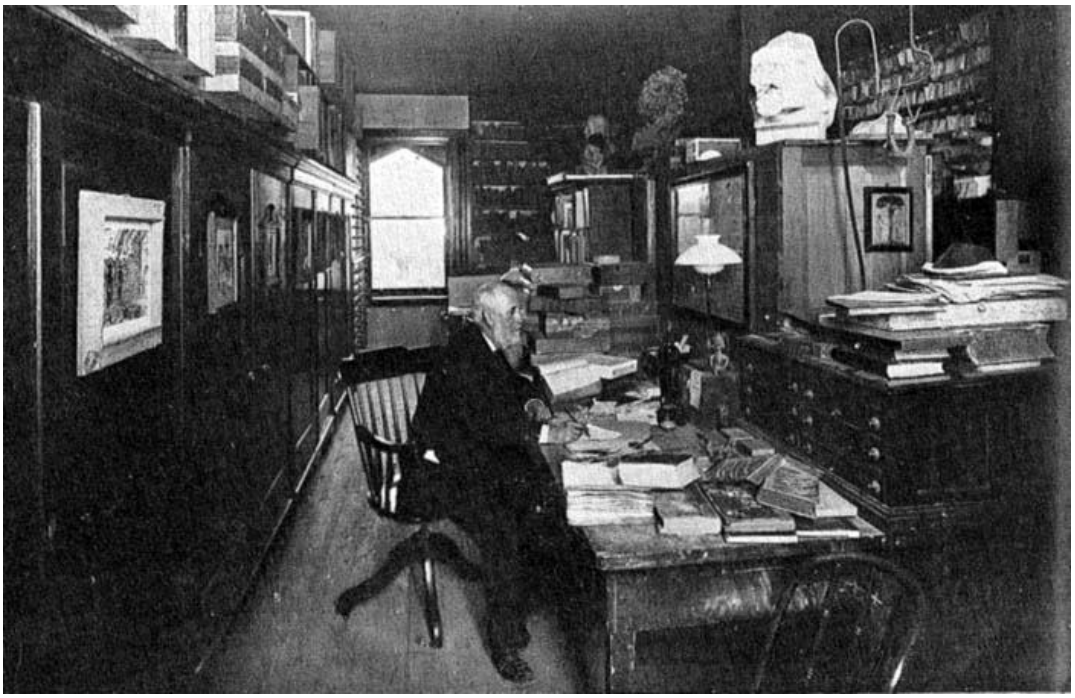


Fig. 29. Herman Strecker at work in his study in Reading, PA. Berks County Historical Society.

over three hundred specimens new to science, amassing a collection estimated between 50,000 and 375,000 specimens.

While Herman Strecker was a great entomologist, butterflies were merely a hobby. Working ten hours a day Monday through Saturday, Herman made his living as a marble worker and architect. Among his works still standing in Reading are the Turtle Fountain, the Soldier's Monument, the Angel of Resurrection, and the Crucifixion.[12] The latter two are both twenty-eight feet high and well-known monuments today. Traveling a great deal on collecting expeditions, Herman became adept at numerous languages. Later in life, Franklin and Marshall College conferred upon Herman an honorary doctorate, and as such, he was generally referred to as "Doctor Strecker." Following his death in 1901, Herman's butterfly collection was sold to the Field Museum in Chicago for $20,000, where it still resides along with thousands of Strecker's personal letters.[13]

Herman Strecker was but one of Ferdinand and Ann Kern's children, of course, but the others were not quite as successful. Lewis Strecker, younger brother to Herman, followed the footsteps of his maternal uncles, serving as a zoologist on expeditions across the world. Lewis was said to have been murdered by Mayan Indians while collecting in Central America.[14] The third known son, born in 1840, was named in honor of Ann's father, John Kern, who died after falling off a derrick in the port of Philadelphia. John Kern Strecker, like his father and eldest brother, went on to become a stone mason, establishing his own shops in Red Bud and later Waterloo, Illinois, the home of his wife,

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[12] Ibid, 99.

[13] "The Strecker Collection of Lepidoptera and the American Museum of Natural History," *Science* (American Association for the Advancement of Science) 15, no. 369 (January 1902): 156.

[14] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC. *Baylor Lariat* clipping with handwritten date "6-10-1925."

Sally Agnew. John, similar to his ancestors, was a passionate herpetologist and knowledgeable in natural history.[15]

Fig. 30. Business card for John Kern Strecker Sr.'s marble works shop. BU-MMC.

Fig. 31. Photograph of the street-view of Strecker's shop in Waterloo, Illinois. It is unknown which shop existed first, Waterloo or Red Bud. BU-MMC.

John Kern Strecker, Jr., John Sr. and Sally's only child, was born in Waterloo on July 10, 1875. Much like his relatives, John Jr. was also "bothered with the butterfly and beetle bug," collecting what he deemed a "prize collection" of butterflies at the ripe age

[15] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC. Baylor Lariat clipping, handwritten date, "6-10-1925."

of seven.[16] He likely knew of his uncles' and great uncles' travels, and admiring the ethos of the Western frontier, John Jr. was an avid reader of dime novels. He wrote "the modern psychologist probably wonders if all of the boys who, like Mark Twain's immortal character, Tom Sawyer, have slept on rough boards in preparation for piratical careers (I was one) were readers of penny dreadful."[17] After spending most of his youth in Fort Scott, Kansas, the Strecker family moved to Waco, Texas in November of 1887. John Sr., had accepted a position as a marble cutter at Wells-Gooch Company. Despite his dreams of traveling the world, swashbuckling, collecting, and studying the unknown, John Kern Strecker Jr. and his family would remain in Waco for the remainder of their lives.

Following the move to Texas, John's formal schooling came to end. Most days he would work alongside his father, learning the trade of stone work, but other days he ran wild in the Texas prairie land and along the White Rock escarpment. His interests broadened to include ornithology and herpetology. By the age of sixteen, John began publishing academic articles, his first on local birds, noting such things as nesting habits, eggs, and population distributions. John also began to rub shoulders with Central Texas elite, counting J.W. Mann, Jr., among his good friends and collecting partners.[18] The Manns were one of Waco's most wealthy families, owners of the East Terrace estate on the northern side of the Brazos River. The Strecker home quickly became a storehouse of natural history specimens. Unable to find adequate research materials in Waco, Strecker began exchanging specimens for publications from some of the foremost leading

[16] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC.

[17] Ibid, clipping from "Reminiscences of a Field Naturalist."

[18] Ibid, unidentified clipping.

scientists and institutions in America.[19] During the 1890s, John published on a variety of topics, becoming a known authority on amphibians and reptiles of Texas and the Southwest. All his work culminated in being offered a job at Baylor University as curator of the university museum, a position previously held by Professor Orlando C. Charlton and James J. Carroll.[20] John would serve in this position from October of 1903 until his death in 1933 – committing thirty years of his life to building a premier natural history museum for Baylor and Central Texas.

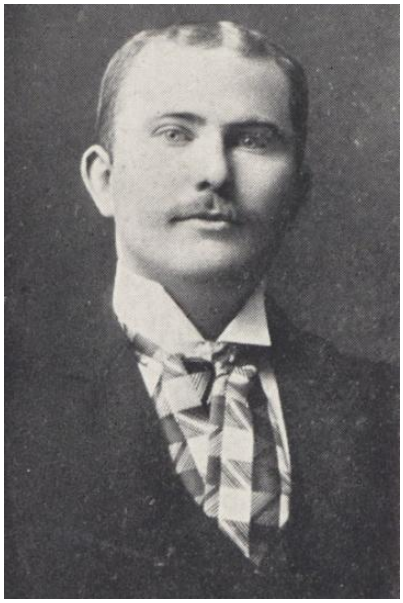

Fig. 32. John Kern Strecker in the 1904 Baylor yearbook, The Baylor Round Up. BU-MMC.

One of the oldest museums in the Southwest and in Texas, the Baylor University Museum was founded in 1893, with the creation of the position of curator, the formal organization of the university's teaching collection, and a call for donations of artifacts and specimens. Though the museum had regular operating hours, open to everyone free

[19] Arthur N. Bragg, "Naturalist and Man." *Bios* (Beta Beta Beta Biological Society) 32, no. 4 (December 1961): 177.

[20] The post was also held by a "Mr. Recker," for less than a month.

of charge six days a week, objects were unorganized, scarcely interpreted, and inadequately stored or displayed. The museum had been moved from location to location, seemingly viewed by the administration as a token collection; however, with the hiring of Strecker, the museum developed as a legitimate research and collecting institution.

Strecker immediately called upon the community to rally support for the museum, outlining a plan for a museum of "samples of all Texas curious either animate or inanimate objects, so far as lies in the power of men who are possessed with much diligence and loyalty and little coin of the realm."[21] Among these contributions was a finback whale skull, donated by Reverend L.C. Taylor of Bakia, Brazil.[22] It was among the largest skulls of its sort displayed in the United States and an indication of things to come. Not only did Strecker solicit the aid of the Baylor community, after gaining the proper permits, he spent countless hours and trips across Texas collecting on behalf of the museum.[23]

Within the first year of his tenure, it was estimated that $1,500 worth of specimens had been added to the museum's collection.[24] On a trip to the East Coast in 1907, Strecker studied methods of several of the large museums, choosing to narrow the collecting scope of natural history specimens to Texas.[25] Utilizing early collection

[21] Brown, "A History of the Strecker Museum, 1857-1968," 28.

[22] Floyd Francis Davidson, *One Hundred Forty Years of Biology at Baylor University*, (Baylor University, 1991), 114.

[23] Brown, "A History of the Strecker Museum, 1857-1968," 25.

[24] Ibid, 26.

[25] Ibid, 29-30.

management techniques, Stecker systematically classified, documented, catalogued, and labeled objects. From the collecting jaunts and hours of classifying objects, Strecker published a host of scientific papers, distributing them widely to like-minded institutions and scholars. Additionally, Strecker continued to utilize the collection as a teaching aid for the university, as well as visiting groups of school children.[26] Utilizing his influence with the Texas Cotton Palace, Strecker undertook an early form of museum outreach, mounting an annual exhibit at the heavily attended event. "It proved an excellent advertisement and created much favorable comment."[27] From the basement of the Carroll Science Hall, Strecker had begun building a natural history museum that was estimated to be the fourth largest in the South.[28]

Fig. 33. 701 S. 6th Street, the Strecker family home until 1915. BU-MMC.

[26] Brown, "A History of the Strecker Museum, 1857-1986," 36.

[27] Gerhardt, Karen. *Chasing the Bone Pile: A Centennial History of the Strecker Museum.* Waco, Strecker Museum Complex, Baylor University, 1995), 32.

[28] Gerhardt, *Chasing the Bone Pile*, 24.

While John Kern Strecker, Jr., was busy building the Baylor University Museum in a modern and reputable institution, his parents, whom he lived with at 701 S. 6th Street, became gravely ill. They both died in July 1915, just five days apart. In a letter of condolence to Strecker, Aubry L. Gooch, whose father had employed John Sr., wrote: "My father has just sent me a paper announcing your father's departure, also your mother's. I can feel for you, for next to my own father, your father has always held a place in my heart. Even from the time I was large enough to know him, up through the years when I learned that in him, I know a man whose character was one to be admired, and who learning was of such quality and quantity, that any college professor, whose PhDs were numerous, might envy him." [sic][29]

The loss of John's parents hurt him deeply, but he would not remain alone long. He struck up a relationship with a woman named Mary Robert Boyd, a Waco native who was known as "Ruby." Ruby worked alongside John in the Registrar's Office in the Carroll Science Building.[30] They fell in love and married on October 27, 1915, in front of forty guests at Ruby's parents' home on North 11th Street.[31] Signing the marriage license as witnesses were Assistant Registrar Louise E. Willis, Baylor President Samuel P. Brooks, and Registrar Frank M. Allen.[32] Another indication of how popular Ruby and John were around campus, they were presented with a chest full of silver as a wedding

[29] Wilby Gooch to John Kern Strecker, July 8, 1915, John Kern Strecker Vertical File, Folder 1, Texas Collection, Baylor University.

[30] Brown, "A History of the Strecker Museum, 1857-1968," 17.

[31] Gerhardt, *Chasing the Bone Pile*, 34.

[32] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC. The marriage license, like most of the items in the scrapbook is glued down, unnumbered, and a preservation concern.

gift from the entire Baylor faculty.[33] Moving in with Ruby's parents, who would also soon pass away, the newlywed couple would maintain the small 11th street home as their residence until John's death. John and Ruby attempted to have children, but after the deaths of a ten week old son and two infant daughters, they were ultimately unable to do so. Friends of the Streckers mentioned how Ruby and John were polar opposites, having a strange relationship.[34] The two were rarely seen out together in public, but one friend speculated that Ruby "kept him in line."

Fig. 34. John Kern Strecker and Ruby Boyd, 1915 Baylor *Round Up*, BU-MMC.

While John and his wife were rarely seen in public together, he was often busy with his growing responsibilities at Baylor. Due to the environmental conditions of the basement of the Carroll Science Building, where the museum was housed, flooding and mold were often problems that required hours of the Strecker's attention each day. Aware of the preservation concerns, Strecker and Baylor administrators believed a new home was necessary. Costing roughly four thousand dollars, a new museum building was

[33] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC.

[34] Mary Sendon, interview by Margaret Logue, August 8, 1990, John K. Strecker Oral History Project, BU-MMC.

constructed on the south side of the Main Building – a fifty by sixty foot A-frame wood structure.[35] Strecker seemed to dislike the new building, later calling it a "shack." [36]

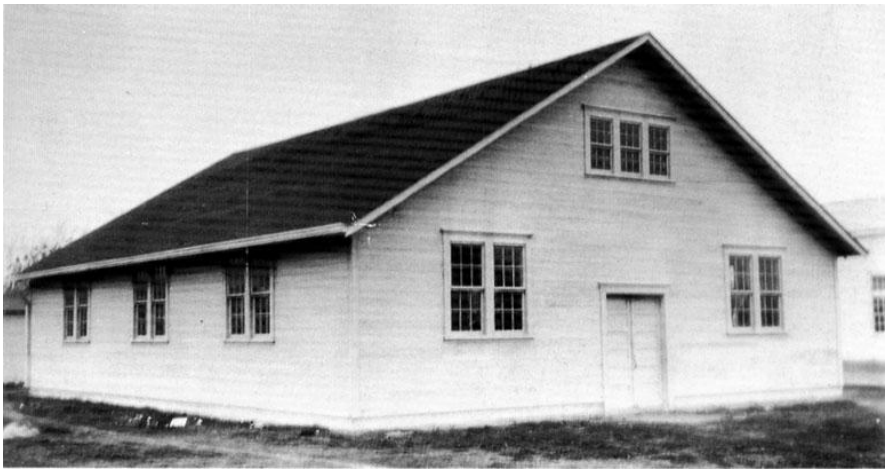

Fig. 35. Photograph of the exterior of the Baylor University Museum building, used between 1915 and 1926.

After a fire at an adjacent, and identical, athletic building in 1926, Strecker lobbied for a more suitable building. This time, the museum landed in the Carroll Library, where it remained until 1939. Strecker became adept at appealing to the administration and alumni for much-needed aid – frequently soliciting specimens and new exhibit cases. "In building up a university or college museum, the Curator must, to a great extent, depend on the alumni for both money and material. From a financial stand-point, Baylor has never had any money to spend on its museum. While as an advertisement, the department has been of considerable value to the institution, and its material has been frequently used in biological class work and in illustrating Mission lectures in various parts of the State, it is yet a fact that it has no financial income from any source."[37]

[35] Brown, "A History of the Strecker Museum," 38-39.

[36] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC.

[37] Baylor University Round Up 1915, BU-MMC.

Emphasizing that the value of the institution was in its use, Strecker wrote, "If Baylor students look upon the Museum as a collection of strange and curious objects and make no use of it, they are the ones that suffer."[38] Strecker successfully, and quite profoundly, argued the importance of the museum in the community and as a tool at the disposal of all Baylor student and faculty.

In addition to his duties as museum curator, Strecker also served as an assistant in the library from 1908 until 1919, when he was promoted to university librarian.[39] With Strecker also assisting in the Registrar's Office, the museum staff worked to accommodate the increasing demands on Strecker's time, but also to care for the burgeoning collection. Just as diligent as he was with documenting museum objects, Strecker also took special care of Baylor's library holdings. Past students noted how each book was carefully numbered with Strecker's immaculate handwriting.[40] As Strecker demanded exacting work from himself and his staff, he also was known to rule the library and those who visited with an iron fist. As noted in an article from the *Baylor Lariat*, library rules included designated areas for male and female study, no whispering or speaking of any kind, no loitering in the halls or lobby, and an approved and signed application by the Chair of the Graduate Committee must be had in order to access the stacks.[41] Strecker was also notoriously unforgiving when it came to overdue book fines, and as such, the student newspaper took great pleasure in reporting a sighting of Strecker

[38] *Baylor Lariat*, August 14, 1909.

[39] Gerhardt, *Chasing the Bone Pile*, 25.

[40] Walter J. Williams, interview by Margaret Logue Suderth, 1990, John K. Strecker Oral History Project, BU-MMC.

[41] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC.

paying overdue fees at the local public library.[42] In any event, the Baylor University Library experienced substantial growth under Strecker's direction – most notably acquiring a major gift of historical manuscripts from Dr. Kenneth Aynesworth that led to the creation of the Texas Collection.

A man of many interests, Strecker was active in nearly innumerable professional organizations and passionate about a diverse set of hobbies. He collected stamps obsessively, amassing a collection of over twenty thousand, serving as chairman of the Texas Philatelic Association, and a regular contributor to stamp collecting publications. Strecker's first serious academic interest and publications came in the field of ornithology, and as such, he became an expert on show pigeons and superintendent of the poultry show at the Cotton Palace Exhibition for many years. An officer in the Woodmen of the World, Vice President to the Texas State Library Association, President of the Texas Academy of Science, charter member of the McLennan County Historical Society, a badge examiner for the Boy Scouts, Waco Sherriff, writer for the *Waco Times Herald*, President of the Texas Folklore Society, President of Texas Game and Fish Protective Association, and many more scientific groups, Strecker was a terribly busy man. He was also a member of numerous fraternal organizations, a thirty-second degree Scottish Rite Mason and member of the Waco Karem Temple Shrine. In fact, John K. Strecker was involved in such a large number of organizations, one has to question the amount of time he was able to devote to each of them, or even to sleep.[43]

Strecker was also passionate about politics. For many years, John sat as the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Democratic Party of McLennan County.

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[42] Strecker Scrapbook, clipping with a handwritten note "Lariat 9-26-1926," BU-MMC.

[43] Gerhardt, *Chasing the Bone Pile*, 30.

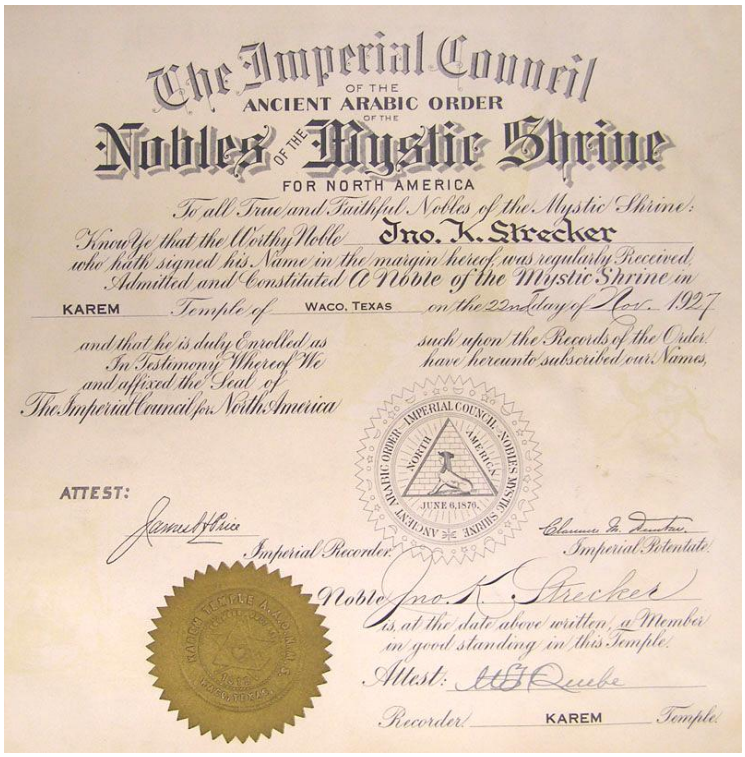


Fig. 36. Strecker's masonic membership certificate from 1927, in Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC.

When asked why a man of all his interests still pursued the harsh world of political life, he responded that he simply "loves the thrill." Even serving as secretary and campaign manager for Samuel P. Brooks's failed 1916 run for the U.S. Senate, John very nearly had to choose either the museum and Baylor or a position in Washington, D.C. A friend and Democratic colleague remarked "If he had been born and reared in a large city, he would have turned out to be a ward political boss. He can sniff and enjoy politics like a sot smells his booze."[44] Yet, when he ran for Mayor of Waco in 1918, after initial success, Strecker withdrew in lieu of another Democrat and friend. Some have speculated that John stepped down due to criticism of his Germanic heritage, in the highly politicized climate surrounding World War I.

[44] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC.

A 1991 oral history interview with Homa Hill, a former student library aid, revealed much about Strecker's political and fraternal life. Hill stated Strecker "controlled politics. You could no more be a district attorney or judge without his consent."[45] Hill also claimed that Strecker, who was friends with his father, was an active member of the Ku Klux Klan. "Well, Mr. Strecker, oh, he wore a Ku Klux Klan ring like my father did – or a pin." Suggesting that secret organizations such as the Klan and the Skull and Bones Society were a source of his power, Hill believed Strecker to be one of the most powerful men in Central Texas. Though Hill's interview cannot be taken as fact, his claims may be corroborated by a document found amongst the Mayborn's collection in which Strecker maps out social motivations of those who join fraternal organizations. In this document, Strecker links the Ku Klux Klan, the Masons, and political office, citing his "personal experience."[46] Whether Strecker was a member of such secret organizations is not certain, but given the political climate of Central Texas and his many affiliations, Strecker was probably a member of the Ku Klux Klan.[47]

Consistent in descriptions of Strecker's personality were anecdotes of how outgoing and well-liked he was by the Baylor family. In his late twenties when he was first hired, he was quick to gain favor of the students, heading up a number of slightly less than academic clubs including the Skull and Bones Club, as well as Fat Man's Club. Serving as waterboy at various Baylor sporting events, Strecker was known to occasionally swap buckets and pull a snake out of the pail late in the game, to much

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[45] Homa Hill, interview by Mary Margaret Harrison, July 19, 1990, John K. Strecker Oral History Project, BU-MMC.

[46] "Social Study of the Joiner," BU-MMC.

[47] Brown, Norman D. *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug: Texas Politics, 1921-1928*. College Station: Texas Am&M University Press, 1984.

Fig. 37. The Fat Man's Club. Strecker is pictured on the front row, far right. BU-MMC.

cheering from the crowd, of course. Students even jokingly protested his serving water at the annual Faculty vs. Students baseball game. The student team manager remarked, "We know him. He will poison us by putting rattlesnakes or some other foul reptile in the water bucket. I think someone ought to petition the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals."[48] Strecker replied to the accusation, "Rattlesnake wouldn't poison them anyways." Another common element of recollections of Strecker was his pipe, for he was rarely seen without it. In fact, aside from President Brooks himself, Strecker was the only person officially permitted to smoke on campus. [49] [50] Of course, being

[48] Strecker Scrapbook, clipping with the handwritten note "Lariat 5-12-27," BU-MMC.

[49] Gerhardt, *Chasing the Bone Pile*, 25.

[50] Walter J. Williams, interview by Margaret Logue Suderth, 1990, John K. Strecker Oral History Project, BU-MMC.

knowledgeable with regard to object preservation, Strecker never smoked while in the museum or library. Strecker never learned to drive a car. Refusing to get rid of his horse and buggy until 1924, but unable to drive his new Ford, he still required others to cart him around.[51] So revered at Baylor, Strecker was awarded an honorary Master's Degree in 1925, undoubtedly one of the proudest moments of his life. Strecker, in appreciation, spoke at the ceremony, "I have had several opportunities to engage in professional biological work in connection with museums and scientific surveys, but two things have always prevent me from leaving Baylor University – my love for my work here and my appreciation of the Christian fellowship of the best and most consecrated set of men and women in the world – the members of the Baylor faculty."[52]

Strecker was a devout Christian and an elder in two Waco Presbyterian churches.[53] Of particular interest is how his religious views applied to his scientific study, for Strecker was not a "Darwinist."[54] He did not subscribe to evolutionary biology, but rather, he believed that through studying the natural world, we come to understand God's work, and thus we become closer to God. This is learned from a set of speech notes, unaccessioned and uncataloged, in the Mayborn's collection of Strecker materials. In these notes, Strecker wrote that naturalists, as a rule, were not very fond of "human poetry," but "more greatly intrigued by poetry of nature."[55] Strecker was an avid conservationist, and though he collected nearly everything he could in the field, he did so

[51] Strecker Scrapbook, handwritten note "Lariat 10-6-27," BU-MMC.

[52] Strecker Scrapbook, handwritten note "Lariat, June 10, 1925," BU-MMC.

[53] Bragg, "Naturalist and Man," 177.

[54] Undated Speech Notes, Strecker file, BU-MMC.

[55] Undated Speech Notes, Strecker file, BU-MMC.

only with a conscious mind towards the ecological consequences of his actions.[56] He was vehemently against wanton destruction in the field, making sure no one in his collecting parties engaged in such actions.[57] Of course, his caution was not only with concern for the environment intrinsically, but also a reverence towards what he believed to be God's work. Strecker continued in his notes, "Great museums are great education factors, for their displays teach hundreds of thousands of persons the wonders of God's creation, the economic importance of birds, animals and plants. I believe that everything was created for a purpose in the sublime scheme of nature. The Great Creator assembled great lakes of petroleum, enormous beds of coral and masses of limestone for the benefit of humanity." Certainly this manner of thinking was, and still is, compatible with Baylor University's mission providing Christian education.

Above all else, John Kern Strecker was a collector. He obsessively collected natural history specimens, as well as stamps and books, and being the completionist that he was, he wanted them all. Well-known is how Strecker dressed strategically when collecting in the field, making sure to wear a tie as a sort of "camouflage," so that he wouldn't be mistaken for a "hobo" and run off the land by the owner.[58] Considering Strecker's jovial nature, many of those who came to question why he was roaming around on their land, ended up collecting along side of him. In the mould of many early museums, quantity was a major emphasis in Strecker's exhibition. For an exhibition of Texas reptiles and amphibians, Strecker boasted more than 4,500 species on exhibit,

[56] Ibid.

[57] Bragg, "Naturalist and Man," 178.

[58] Brown, "A History of the Strecker Museum," 19.

which museum staff claimed represented 98 percent of all species found in the area.[59] Strecker was no different with his private collections, much of which is now in possession of the Mayborn Museum. When asked about his personal book collection, Strecker defended his hobby: "Well, most men have life insurance for their wives' protection after they're dead. I have books. I buy my books carefully. I handle them. I read them. I love them. My wife likes them. She handles them. She reads them. She knows where I bought them. She knows where she can sell them. She knows what they're worth. I think it's a safer thing than life insurance. Life insurance companies fail but my books aren't going to."[60] Unfortunately, Strecker's attachment to his pipe led to ill health.[61] He was noticeably frail in his later years, and on January 9, 1933, John Kern Strecker died of heart disease. Eulogizing Strecker at the funeral was former Governor of Texas and President of Baylor University, Pat M. Neff.[62] Strecker was fifty-seven years old.

Considered today to be the father of Texas herpetology, John Kern Strecker was one of the most important contributors to Baylor history and the study of natural science in the region.[63] Strecker came from a profound pedigree, but he managed to do what none of his ancestors had been able to do, give to an institution through which their contributions could continue to be seen and experienced. His father had focused on stone work and paying bills, despite considerable intellectual gifts. While many of his uncles

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[59] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Gerhardt, *Chasing the Bone Pile*, 37.

[62] Strecker Scrapbook, BU-MMC. Among the many treasure in the Strecker Scrapbook, there are also the eulogy notes by Pat M. Neff, with handwritten corrections.

[63] Bragg, "Naturalist and Man," 178.

Fig. 38. Image from newspaper clipping of Strecker in his later years, presumably 1932.

and great uncles died quite young and Herman Strecker was exclusively a private collector, John Kern Strecker was in some ways, the realization of what those before him had inspired to accomplish. Yet, Strecker also fell short at times. Afraid to drive, bound to a love for Baylor, Strecker built around himself with mixed results. Strecker wrote: "If we were to visit a large city owning such a collection we would gladly pay an admission fee and probably spend hours in delighted examination. Yet, because it is so easy of access, we neglect what can be a source of great pleasure and profit to us, and may serve constantly as a valuable aid in grasping facts with which we shall come in contact with in future years."[64] For many, the Baylor University Museum, renamed the Strecker Museum in 1940, was a token institution, an imitation of east-coast Ivy League institutions and their world-renowned museums.

Though the Strecker Museum could not help but remain a mid-level museum in a town dwarfed by cities to the north and south, Strecker's efforts were profound and still an invaluable asset to Baylor, Waco, and all of Texas. Strecker was certainly conscious of posterity and his legacy. He wrote, "hundreds of persons engaged in natural history

[64] *Baylor Lariat*, July 1, 1905.

pursuits have left nothing in the way of records or written observations for the benefit of posterity. Unless collections formed by such persons are, at their deaths, either bequeathed or sold to public institutions where provision is made for the further preservation of such objects, the life of work of these men has also been in vain."[65] Following his death in 1933, Strecker's natural history collection, and later personal library, was donated to the Strecker Museum and Baylor University.

[65] Gerhardt, *Chasing the Bone Pile*, 27.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Provenance and Purpose

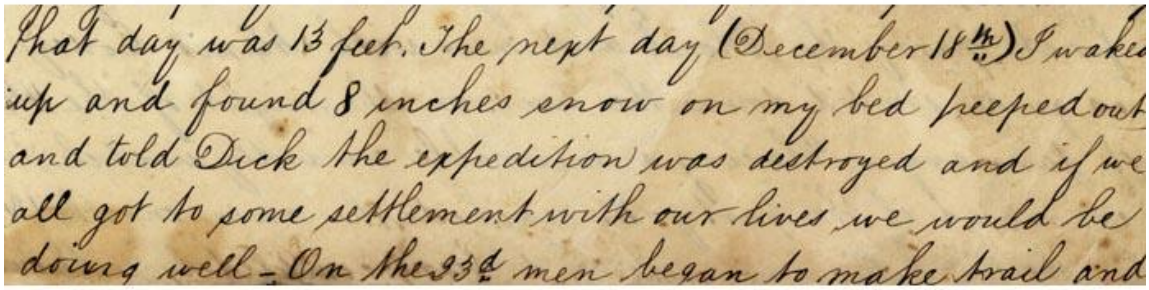
While the Kern letter is but a single artifact, it has historical value that reaches from frontier history, to the Philadelphia intellectual elite, to John Kern Strecker and Baylor University. The letter illuminates a mysterious disaster involving one of the most famous figures of mid-nineteenth century America, as well as the remarkable genealogy of one of Baylor's most beloved sons. Though this dual significance raises a host of questions, the issues of provenance, authenticity, and ownership must be explored. Is the letter original, a contemporary copy, or a later copy? How did the letter come to be in the collections of the Mayborn Museum Complex? Where is the other half of the letter? Does the museum own the letter? Developing the history and authenticity of the letter as a museum object may aid in determining the potential use of the letter. Turning to the American Association of Museums Accreditation Commission's Expectations Regarding Collections Stewardship, the standards of best practices are clearly defined. The Kern letter should be adequately researched "according to appropriate scholarly standards," and proper "intellectual control" of the document should be maintained.[1] Provenance and ownership of the letter must be established before any action may be responsibly taken by the Mayborn Museum.

From literature published about the fourth Frémont expedition, specifically Leroy Hafen's *Frémont's Fourth Expedition*, a documentary account of the disaster of 1848-49,

[1] American Association of Museums Accreditation Commission. "Expectations Regarding Collections Stewardship." January 1, 2005. http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/accred/upload/Collections%20Stewardship%20ACE%20(2005).pdf (accessed June 12, 2009).

the Kern letter appears reprinted in full from beginning to end.[2] Citing the collections of the Huntington Library in California, the 1960 book identified the unsigned letter as having been written by Benjamin Kern, based upon "internal evidence."[3] While it was possible that the Kern letter somehow passed from the Huntington to the Mayborn, the Huntington Library still owns the copy of the Kern letter that was reproduced in 1960. It was common to create second copies of letters for personal keeping. Dr. Peter Blodgett, H. Russell Smith Foundation Curator of Western Historical Manuscripts at the Huntington, identifies the Huntington letter as a contemporary copy: "perhaps having been made by Benjamin Kern just before he dispatched the original letter in order to retain a copy of the contents."[4]

Portion of the Mayborn's Kern Letter




Portion of the Huntington's Kern Letter

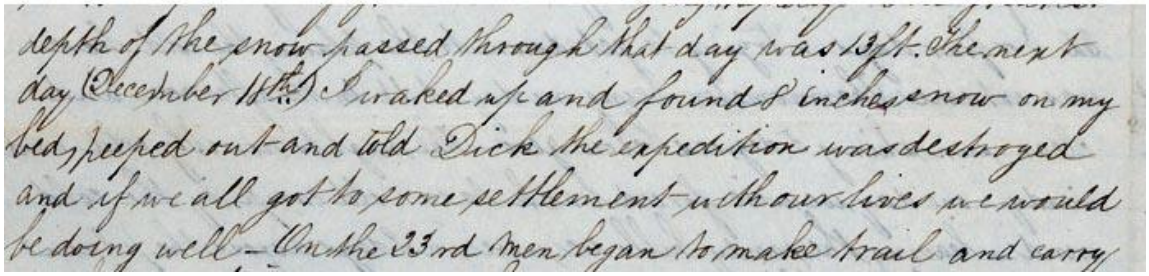



Fig. 39. Comparison of identical passages from both copies of the Kern letter

[2] Hafen, Frémont's Fourth Expedition, 1960.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Peter Blodgett, e-mail message to author, April 15, 2009.

Given that the Huntington letter is unsigned, it seems logical that their letter is the copy that Benjamin had kept for himself, and was lost in the mountains in 1849 when Benjamin and Old Bill Williams were murdered by Ute Indians. After comparing scans of both letters, there is no doubt that the letters were written by the same person, in the same hand, at the same time. The letters are almost identical in wording, but with subtle differences. For instance, a number may be written numerically, rather than spelled-out as it was written in the other copy. With all this in mind, it is apparent that the Mayborn's Kern letter is the original copy mailed East to the yet unidentified "Joe."

Though the letter is a relatively obscure historical document, given Strecker's relation to the Kerns, it is possible that he or someone with the museum could have acquired a more modern copy of the original. The paper is of relatively high quality. In that the letter is presumed to be over one hundred and sixty years old, the paper itself is chemically stable, with only some staining and discoloration. While it may seem counter-intuitive for paper of this age to be in good condition, in fact, it is common. Paper of such age, given that it has not been subjected to extreme environmental conditions or hazards, could be expected to remain well-preserved. Paper made prior to the Civil War in America was of a higher quality, in that it included fewer destructive chemicals and additives. As such, the condition of the paper supports the conclusion that the letter was created in the mid-nineteenth century. The ink appears quite dark, with little to no fading. Many letters prior to the Civil War may have been written in iron gall ink, which would turn brown due to the oxidation of the iron. Around the mid-nineteenth century, a greater variety of inks were developed that included indigo. These inks

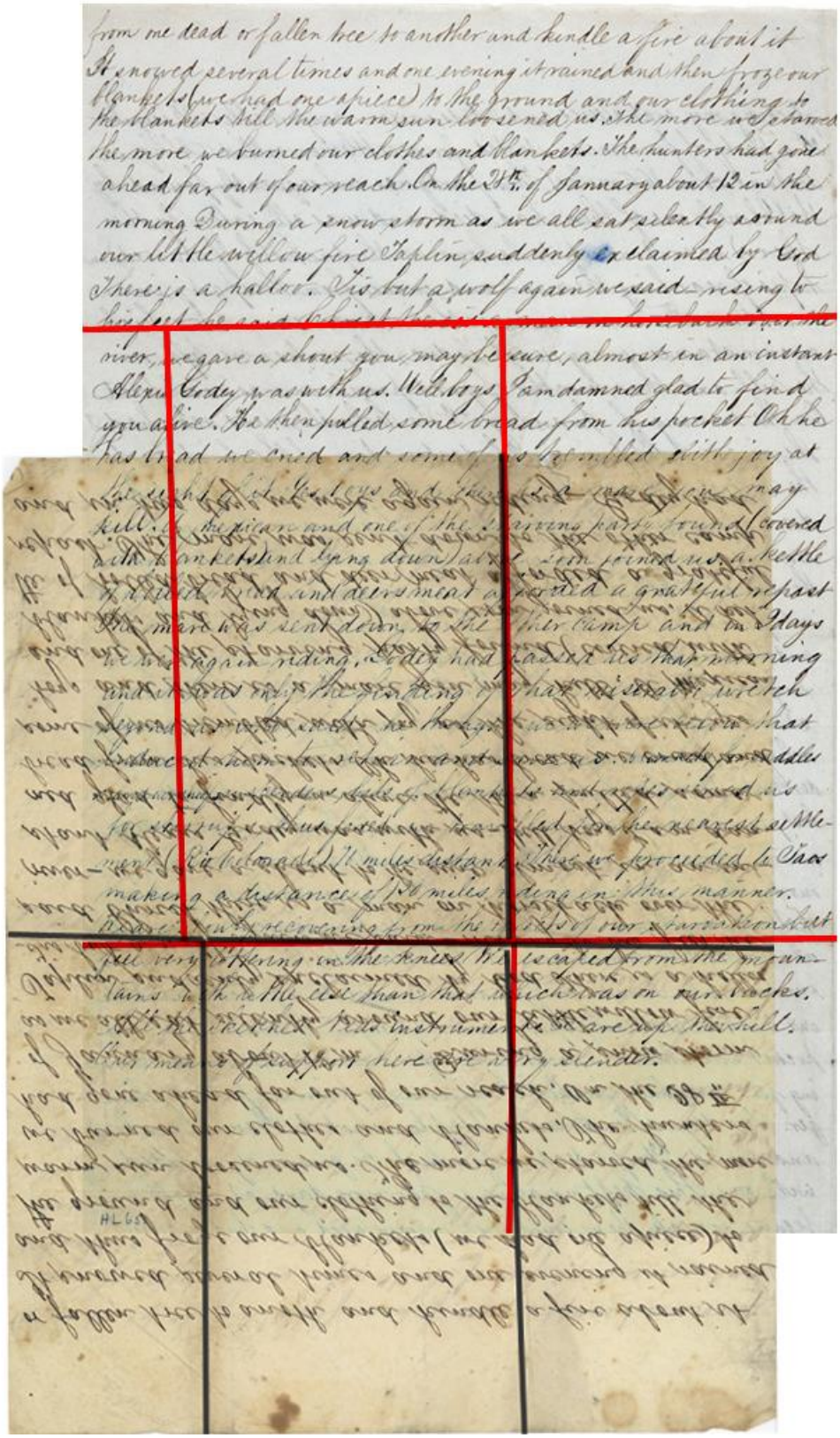


*Fig. 40. Overlay of the two copies of the Kern letters, comparison of folds in fourth pages.*

tend to grow darker with age.[5] The penmanship is characteristic of the period and other Kern letters. Also of interest is the discoloration along fold-lines on the fourth page of both the Huntington and Mayborn Kern letter. When the scans of the letter are formatted to actual size, made transparent and placed upon one another, the lines of discoloration match up. This suggests the letter may have been, at one time long ago, folded together. Due to the fact Benjamin Kern died nearly a month after writing the letter, the possibility of the Mayborn's letter being a copy, and not the original, is unlikely. All signs, the paper, the penmanship, the ink, indicate the Mayborn's Kern letter is the original copy mailed to "Joe" in February of 1849.

The first step of provenance would be establishing the identity of "Joe." Certainly, Benjamin would have known numerous Joes or Josephs. Joseph Leidy, the curator of the Academy of Natural Sciences and well-known paleontologist and microbiologist, and Joseph Drayton, the artist and friend of the Kerns, are but a couple of possibilities, though unlikely.[6] The Joseph or Joe with the greatest proximity to Benjamin and the Frémont Expedition would be Joseph Stepperfeldt, a gunsmith, veteran of the third Frémont Expedition, and another disgruntled member of the fourth expedition.[7] Among the few who remained in Taos after the chaos in the San Juan Range of the Rocky Mountains, Joe Stepperfeldt was the first to travel back east, even publishing accounts of condemnation of Frémont in newspapers.[8] Stepperfeldt, like the Kerns, was eager to place blame of the expedition upon Colonel Frémont. Stepperfeldt

[5] Joe Nickel, *Detecting Forgery: Forensic Investigation of Documents* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 112.

[6] Palmquist and Kailbourn, Pioneer Photographers of the Far West, 346.

[7] Hafen, Frémont's Fourth Expedition, 24.

[8] Hine, *Edward Kern and American Expans*ion , 69.

could have requested that the Kerns mail him their accounts of the expedition, should they wish to have their story told. Benjamin crafted this letter, intentionally filling in gaps in his diary, using information he gathered after arriving in Taos. The story of cannibalism among the first relief party serves as an example of information he could not possibly have known prior to arriving in Taos. If Joe Stepperfeldt was the original recipient of the letter, how do we account for the letter's arrival at the Strecker Museum? Even so, Stepperfeldt or another "Joe" may have given the letter to a newspaper, passed it to the Kern family in Philadelphia upon hearing of Benjamin's death, or deposited it at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia - the possibilities are endless.

As for the Huntington's copy of the letter, its provenance is equally shrouded in mystery. Lost in the mountains in 1849 with the Fort Sutter papers, the Huntington Letter surfaced in an auction house in Philadelphia in the shop of Stanislaus Vincent Henkels.[9] Henkels was a well-known dealer in Western Americana and historical manuscripts, mere blocks from the Academy of Natural Sciences.[10] Around the time that the Huntington believes they acquired their copy of the letter from Henkels, there was a sale of the private western history and rare manuscript collection of Samuel N. Rhoads, an ornithologist and member of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. It is interesting, again, how these documents managed to work their way back to Philadelphia, the home of their creators. The events surrounding the third and fourth Frémont Expeditions were largely unknown until the major discovery and auction of the Fort Sutter Papers in 1921, and were sold to the Huntington Library. The original Kern diaries

[9] Peter Blodgett, email message to the author, April 15, 2009.

[10] Harold Lancour, *American Art Auction Catalogues 1785-1941* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1944), 18.

were part of this accession. Other Kern manuscripts and artwork began to appear through the East Coast in the twentieth century – some watercolors under the floor boards in a hotel in Dingmans Ferry, Pennsylvania, some in a trunk purchased at a garage sale in the Midwest, others appearing at well-known auction houses such as Henkels's.[11] As these objects surfaced across the country, the true story of the tragedy of 1848 began to unfold. With the rapid succession of discoveries, major works were published concerning the expedition, including the books written by Leroy Hafen, Robert Hine, William Brandon, David Weber, and Patricia Richmond. The growth in literature about the Kerns has restored their prominent place among pioneers of Manifest Destiny, which like their writings and artwork, were largely lost until the mid-twentieth century.

Unfortunately the discovery of the Kern letter at the Mayborn does not add significant knowledge to pre-existing scholarship concerning the events of the expedition, but they do open avenues for exploration. As the documents, instruments, reports, diaries, sketches, and letters were lost and then spread about the country piece-meal, each find opens new possibilities of uncovering more relevant material. While there are known reports of a Henry King diary, as well as a diary by Old Bill Williams, they have yet to be located and identified. Henry King's mother complained to John Kern, the eldest surviving brother of Benjamin Kern, that her son's journal mysteriously disappeared after John Charles Frémont had borrowed it for inspection.[12] There is still much debate among scholars as to who was at fault for the expedition, Frémont or Old Bill Williams. Who partook in cannibalism? How did Frémont actually handle the situation after the all-out retreat to Taos? It is certainly possible that a document, Kern

[11] Richmond, *Trail to Disaster*, *xx*.

[12] Rolle, *John Charles Frémont*, 121-122.

sketch, the other half of the Benjamin Kern letter, or another lost diary may exist within the collections of the Mayborn, the Texas Collection, or even in the private hands of descendants of Herman Strecker or Mrs. Ruby Boyd Strecker. Discovery of more documents relating to the expedition could shed light on who was at fault for the disaster and the true nature of John Charles Frémont, a man long scoffed at by historians of frontier America.[13]

There is no known record of the Kern letter in any of the Kern or Strecker family histories. The first piece of documentation comes with the student inquiry to the museum at the University of New Mexico in 1981. David Lintz, a former Registrar at the Strecker Museum, suggests that it was in possession of the museum decades before this inquiry was made. Lintz also believes that some materials from Strecker's personal library may have been divided between the Texas Collection and the museum. Detailed accession records at the Strecker Museum are virtually non-existent prior to the 1930s, but even for the majority of the Strecker Museum's existence, records concerning letters and manuscripts were often vague. Though the Kern letter may have at some point been accessioned, it was never numbered as such and no record is specific enough to identify the letter. Certainly, the museum has no well-defined record of the acquisition, accession, donation, or ownership of the Kern letter.

By studying the Mayborn's collection of Strecker related objects, and the Kern and Strecker family genealogies, connections begin to emerge. Within the museum's collection are numerous works by Herman Strecker, including *Butterflies and Moths of North America*. The Mayborn has Ferdinand Strecker's notebooks, catalogued bookplates from Herman Strecker's works, and even a book that was given to none other

[13] Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire*, 233.

than Edward Kern. *My Last Cruise*, a book documenting the Perry Expedition to Alaska and Japan, was signed by the author as a gift to Edward Kern, who served as artist of the expedition. The letter is but one of hundreds, if not thousands, of objects that trace their provenance to John Kern Strecker, but the museum owns virtually no other objects that relate directly to the Frémont Expedition. Given that the Mayborn owns items from the Kern family, and from Ferdinand and Herman Strecker, John Kern Strecker either actively collected these materials related to his family history or they were given to him by a family member, such as Herman. For the most part, these objects are all similarly undocumented.

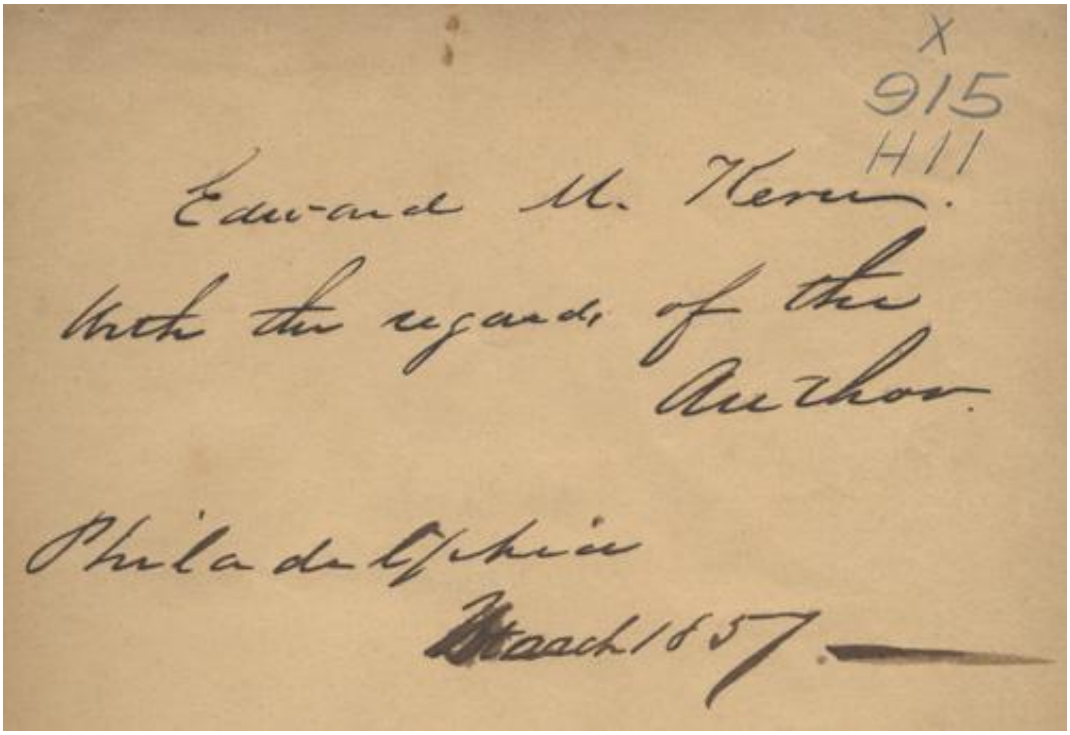



Fig. 41. Inscription on inside cover of the Mayborn's copy of My Last Cruise. The book was housed alongside Strecker's personal library, and features Strecker's hand-numbering just above the inscription.

In that John Kern Strecker rarely spoke of his connection to the Strecker and Kern families of Philadelphia, it is unlikely that anyone would have donated these materials to

the museum, as only Strecker himself probably knew of their significance. By this logic, Strecker probably received these materials from his father or Herman Strecker, who would have been the executer of Ferdiand's will, and the most significant surviving member of the Kern-Strecker clan in the late nineteenth century. Also, given Herman lived in Reading, a short distance from Philadelphia, he probably would have been in close contact with the Kern family after John and Edward's passing. Herman even wrote of his relationship to the famed Kerns, still pondering the cause of Benjamin's death in 1849.[14] There is no known documentation to support this provenance, so it is merely speculation. But given the absence of male descendents from the Kern family, it is likely that these objects were given to Ferdinand and his family, who shared the Kerns' passion for art, science, and the frontier.

The Kern letter was probably brought to Waco by John Kern Strecker Jr. or his father. Given that the vast majority of Strecker's personal library and collection were donated to Baylor University, the Mayborn Museum probably has rights and ownership of the letter; however no documentation to prove ownership has been located. The letter could have come to the museum informally, floating along with what John had left in his office after his death, or through large donations by Mrs. Ruby Boyd Strecker in 1962, or by Walter J. Williams, Strecker's successor as curator. Neither of the Ruby Stecker or Williams accession records are descriptive, lumping manuscripts and such into one accession number, with no object by object description. But once again, given that the museum cannot prove ownership through object records or a deed of gift, does the museum legally own the letter? According to Texas Property Code, Title 6A, Section

[14] Herman Strecker, *Butterflies and moths of North America* (Reading: B.F. Owen, 1878).

80.001-80.008, "any property on loan to a museum for 15 years or more and to which no person has made claim according to the records of the museum is considered abandoned" and is thus considered property of the museum.[15] In order to proceed with any action or use of the letter, the letter should be accessioned into ownership of the museum, citing the Texas property code, with accompanying documentation provided here.

With the letter identified as irreconcilable found in collections object, the Mayborn Museum may proceed to consider the potential use of the letter as a museum object. Professional standards suggest that the letter should be given a number for tracking purposes, as staff deliberates the object's future.[16] Unfortunately the Mayborn has no system or policy in place for handling undocumented objects and must proceed in an ad hoc manner. First, we must reflect upon the museum's status as an institution. As the Mayborn Museum Complex was built in 2003 and first opened to the public in 2004, the Mayborn is a young museum. New museums have a host of special problems to confront – establishing an identity within the community, developing new practices and new procedures for a new environment, and finding institutional stability. The Mayborn is particularly unique, as it was not only the rebirth of the old Strecker Museum and the basement of the Sid Richardson building, but also the merger of two other museums, the Ollie Mae Moen Discovery Center and the Governor Bill and Vara Daniel Historic Village. Currently, the historic village is closed for repair and reconsideration. The museum has struggled to meld these three entities – an outdoor village, a natural history museum, and a children's museum – into one cohesive experience.

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[15] Texas Property Code, *Ownership,Conservation, and Disposition of Property Loaned to Museums,* ch. 80, sec. 80.001-80.008 (1987).

[16] Buck and Gillmore, *Collection Conundrums*, 40.

While the Mayborn Museum continues to grow and shape its identity as a valuable institution to Baylor University and Central Texas, the museum's collections have also experienced difficulties. Though the museum is technically but five years old, the museum has over one hundred and sixteen years of collected objects and neglected problems. Various studies have shown collections to grow, on average, about 1.5 percent each year. Compounded over time, this means collections can double in size every fifty years.[17] The Mayborn houses five separate collections – history, geology, archaeology, ethnography, and biology. Each collection has tens of thousands of objects, only a fraction of which are well-documented in both accession and catalog records. The collecting scope is defined as Central Texas history and natural history, prior to 1915, with exceptions for Baylor related objects. It hardly needs to be said that adherence to this scope is a more recent development, with the vast majority of the collection having been acquired prior to the 1990s. This is not an uncommon problem with collections of such age.

With the Strecker Museum having focused on natural history, collections of another nature, such as the history collection, may have been neglected and poorly documented. The Mayborn Museum, after years of reworking the history collection, has catalog entries for 11,917 objects, with 4,848 having been properly rehoused with a documented location. Almost 6,000 have associated images in the database. While this is enormous progress, the Kern letter is but one example of the thousands that are undocumented and excluded from the nearly 12,000 cataloged history objects. Each of these undocumented objects must be considered with relation to relevance, condition, and

[17] Stephen E. Weil, *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 285.

utility to the museum. While a curator of John Kern Strecker's era may have asked "Is this a truly remarkable and intrinsically desirable object?" Stephen Weil contrasts this manner of appraisal with a more modern approach, in which a curator may ask, "How can this object be useful to the museum in carrying out its institutional mission?"[18] With the future of the village uncertain, the potential uses for much of the history collection is also in limbo.

The Kern letter is a fair example of this dilemma. How is the Mayborn to use such a diverse collection while maintaining relevance and creating an engaging experience for visitors? The letter adequately meets the collecting scope – it is institutionally significant, related to Central Texas and John Kern Strecker, rare, in stable physical condition, and created prior to 1915. With that being said, the Mayborn is not the ideal home for an object of such uncertain utility. According to best practice and standards within the museum field, all collection objects should be periodically reviewed for relevance, utility, and condition – updating documentation as often as necessary. When museums do not maintain such standards, diverse and massive collections can become more of a burden than they are cultural and historical resources.

The most flexible exhibition of artifacts comes in the Discovery Rooms of the museum, where hands-on experiences are prominent. The rotating exhibits in the Baylor University Hall and Anding Traveling Exhibit Gallery are often third-party produced exhibits with loaned objects. As such, there is little room or future prospect for the rotation of rarely seen objects for public viewing. It is unlikely that the letter would ever be exhibited to the public in the Mayborn. The most convenient exhibit space for the letter would be in the Cabinets of Curiosities, an exhibit hall where the history of

[18] Weil, *Rethinking the Museum*, 290.

museums and the Strecker Museum are explored, including antiquated exhibit techniques of the earliest museums in America. While the exhibit is well-executed, there are no object labels and the letter would be lost amongst the hundreds of other fascinating objects on display. The most appropriate display of the letter would be through a temporary exhibition of early Strecker Museum objects in the Baylor University Hall; however the somewhat convoluted relevance of the letter to Baylor University is inadequate. There are currently no behind-the-scenes tours or public access to the collection areas or the information contained therein. The Mayborn does not currently digitize and make their collections accessible online, so there are very few research requests. As museums should plan to make their collections accessible through display or access, the Mayborn and the subject matter and nature of the Kern letter are a poor fit.

If the Kern letter may not serve its greatest use to the public at the Mayborn Museum, then where does it belong? What is the greatest value of the letter as a museum object? The Kern letter is certainly most significant as an account of Frémont's Fourth Expedition, an artifact of Manifest Destiny, and the last written words of Benjamin Kern, not as evidence of John Kern Strecker's relationship to the Kern family. With respect to the letter and the knowledge it holds, the letter should be transferred to another institution that may more ably provide for its public utility. Among the museums and libraries that specialize in Kern artifacts, John C. Frémont, and Western Americana, are Yale's Beinecke Rare Manuscript Library, the Amon Carter Museum in Ft. Worth, Texas, the Bancroft Library at the University of California, and the Huntington Library. The Huntington Library by far has the largest collection of Kern manuscripts, but most importantly, the contemporary copy of the Mayborn's Kern letter. The two letters,

rejoined presumably for the first time since their authorship in Taos in February of 1849, would complement each other well. Though both letters contain almost identical information, their reunion would be a testament to the work of generations of those who saved and preserved an artifact for its incredible story, rather than its intrinsic value.

Some within the Baylor community may disapprove of the disposal of such a significant letter through transfer to another institution. Yet, there is no denying the letter is more important to frontier history than it is to Baylor history. Museums must not resist change. Simon Knell writes, "to set collections in concrete is indefensible and has been a root cause of museums' failure to achieve successful custodianship."[19] Traditional museum ethics "if anything, have encouraged loss by neglect as museums have been obliged to hold onto collections even when they have no prospect" of caring for or exhibiting the objects in an appropriate manner. The transfer of the Kern letter to the Huntington, though it is simply one sheet of paper, would be a sign of profound progress for the Mayborn Museum Complex as an institution and the old Strecker collection.

[19] Simon J. Knell, "Altered Values: Search for a New Collection," in *Museums and the Future of Collecting*. (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 17.

# Conclusion

After months of research, an undocumented object that had eluded collections staff for decades has been evaluated and indentified. The Kern letter is a prime example of the need to revisit collections objects, not only because of the need to evaluate the object's relevance to the museum's mission, but to also utilize the growing resources available to researchers. The Internet, digitization of collections, and the proliferation of searchable databases online has enabled collections staff to identify objects and their histories more efficiently than even. Despite these new tools, the letter could not be reconciled. Inadequate documentation, shifting storage areas, and the evolution of the museum's meaning to the community, have all taken the letter further away from any chance of reconciliation. Soundly a found in collection object, the museum is faced with a decision whether to claim, accession, and catalog the letter, or seek one of the many options for disposal. Among these options, the only appropriate course for such an object is transfer to another institution. With the Huntington Library's vast resources and collection of relevant materials, including the contemporary copy of the Kern letter, the Huntington would best be able to provide for the preservation and future access of the letter. Presumably for the first time since their creation, the two letters may be rejoined and studied as a pair – the last written words of Benjamin Jordan Kern.

The donation of the Kern letter to the Huntington would form a bond between the two institutions, contributing to a sense of professional community. Though the letter does not add significant information to academic knowledge of the expedition, the letter fragment may open avenues for future discoveries. The letter, as a fragment, will

certainly become more visible. This could possibly result in the location of the other half of the original Kern letter. Knowledge of the Strecker-Kern connection may lead to more discoveries of Kern artifacts. The existence of the book in the Mayborn archive, *My Last Cruise*, with the inscription to Edward Kern suggests that there may be more Kern related objects in the Mayborn Musueum, and possibly even Baylor's own Texas Collection.

Though the Mayborn may transfer the letter, much would still be gained. Elaine Heumann Gurian writes in her article "What is the Object of this Exercise?" "When parsed carefully, the objects, in their tangibility, provide a variety of stakeholders with an opportunity to debate the meaning and control of their memories. It is the ownership of the story, rather than the object itself, that the dispute has been all about."[1] Certainly the information obtained through the Kern letter is far more valuable than the paper and ink itself. Simon Knell echoes this same sentiment – "So do we need the object as a voucher to prove the point?"[2] Though Strecker was basically uneducated, he was descended from a long line of artist-scientists whose roots were in Philadelphia. Philadelphia, the scientific and intellectual capital of the United States in the nineteenth century, produced some of the world's leading naturalists. Strecker is the fruit of organizations such as the Academy of Natural Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, and as such, Central Texas has continued to reap the benefits of their passion for learning.[3]

The Kern letter serves as a tangible connection to the tradition of the American frontier, natural history, and the great scientists of the industrial revolution. Utilizing this

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[1] Elaine Heumann Gurian, "What's the Object of This Exercise?" in *Museums and the Future of Collecting*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2004, 271.

[2] Knell, *Museums and the Future of Collecting*, 26.

[3] Goetzmann, Exploration and Empire, 183.

connection, the education staff may better convey the story of the institution. As a recent article in *Museum*, a publication of the American Association of Museums, stated, "collections don't tell stories…Museum staff do."[4] Utilizing the information provided here, the Mayborn collections staff may continue to do more detailed research into the life and activities of John Kern Strecker. With the research provided here, the Mayborn Museum now knows far more about the lineage of its former namesake, John Kern Strecker. Through the memory of Strecker's genealogy and numerous skills and accomplishments, the Mayborn Museum may more ably tell the story of their institutional history – certainly better than with a "Mystery Letter" resting idly amongst other undocumented objects in the grey metal cabinets in the Mayborn's history collection.

[4] Susan Glasser, "Manifesto Destiny," Museum (November/December 2008) http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/manifestodestiny.cfm (accessed June 4, 2009).

# APPENDICES

# APPENDIX A

## Baylor University-Mayborn Museum Complex, Benjamin Kern Letter Transcript

"near its top – next day men were sent ahead to make a trail and then camp started for the top distant 2 miles which we reached in 3 ½ hours – during a cold wind – when on the top the snow dust so plenty that we could see nothing else. Some of the men sat on the stones and began to freeze others became blind It required the full energy of the remainder to turn camp back again on the trail to our former resting place which we happily reached all alive but many frost bitten. The next day a new route over the ridge was choosen, a trail beaten, and again we started. The next day cold and calm, towards 3 Oclock we reached the top (2 ½ miles) and at dark found a camp on the other side (3 ½ miles) in a small grove of friendly pines. The animals were unpacked at the edge of a bleak windy hill down which nearly all the snow from mountain top blew and then driven again to the top of the ridge, to feed if they could upon a few scattering blades of dry grass – Mules dying rapidly – The greatest depth of snow passed through that day was 13 feet. The next day (December 18th) I waked up and found 8 inches snow on my bed peeped out and told Dick the expedition was destroyed and if we all got to some settlement with our lives we would be doing well – On the 23rd men began to make trail and carry packs, a difficult undertaking on account of the great elevation which rendered our breathing very short and difficult – on Christmas day we had all established in a 7 feet snow new camp. The mules were yet on the mountain top and presented a sad spectacle having eaten each others manes, tails and backs, also such parts of the baggage as they could – not neglecting my coat sleeves and Neds woolen comfortable – December

26th a part of 4 men started for a settlement called Albiquiu distant some 160 miles (This party were subsequently found by the colonel. One of them had died and was eaten by the others) we continued to labor at the packs half starved in hopes of reaching the river and succor from this party in short time. From reason or rather no reason and to which circumstance every death is due the mules were left on the hill and thus months of good provision sacrificed. On the evening of January 2nd the Colonels mess with Alexis reached the river – Supposing the destruction of the first party the Colonel and mess with Alexis Godey as guide started down the river. On the night of the 11th of January – Placing a miserable cowardly wretch in command of the party. We reached the river on the 13th On the 16th killing no game and being completely without [next page] provision (except a piece of parr flesh (buffalo parchment) and some 2 or 3 feet of hide rope in our mess of six – and a particle of sugar and coffee – we took a blanket a piece and our rifles and started down the river in hopes of getting game and meeting relief. On the 3rd day a deer was killed of which we obtained the bare should blade for the 6 of us. On the 6th day getting no more game we made our last possible camp and joined the remnant of another mess making in all 7 of us. The stronger party containing all the hunters enticed away our two Indian boys and deserted us – I became gradually the weakest of all. One day I laid down the shades of death were stealing gradually over me the others covered me with their blankets, there I lay till near sundown when I made an effort to arise, crawled to my sack and took out 3 or 4 inches lash rope, found a spoonfull of sweet oil in my pocket with which I annointed the rope and then ate it, next morning felt somewhat refreshed. I suffered no pain of hunger. Two days after Charley Taplin killed 2 prairie chickens and found ¾ of a dead wolf which he generously divided with us. This kept us alive a few

more days. At length we became so weak that we could chop no more wood and had to crawl from one dead [next page] or fallen tree to anoth and kindle a fire about it It snowed several times and one evening it rained and thus froze our blankets (we had one apiece) to the ground and our clothing to the blankets till the warm sun loosened us. The more we starved the more we burned our clothes and blankets. The hunters had gone ahead far out of our reach. On the 28th of January about 12 m During a snow storm as we all sat silently around our little willow fire Taplin suddenly exclaimed by God there is a halloo Tis but a wolf again we said – rising to his feet he said Christ there is a man on horseback over the river – we gave a shout to be sure. Almost in an in-stant Alexis Godey was with us – Well boys I am dam-ned glad to find you alive. He then pulled some bread from his pockets. Oh he has bread we cried and some of us trembled with joy at the sight of it – yes boys and there is a mare you may kill. A Mexican and one of the starving party found (covered with blankets and lying down) above soon joined us. A ket-tle of boiled bread and deer meat afforded a greatful repast. The mare was sent down to the other camp and in two days we were again riding- Godey had"

APPENDIX B

Strecker Museum Correspondence Concerning Mystery Letter

21 April 1981

New Mexico State Library
300 Don Gasper  Box 1629
Sante Fe, New Mexico  87503

Dear Sir:

I am a student at Baylor University and am researching a letter for Strecker Museum. (A copy of this letter is enclosed.) The letter was uncatalogued in the Museum's files; its author, date, and donor are unknown. I have tried to identify the names and expedition mentioned in the letter, but Baylor's resources are inadequate. I did find reference to a Captain Charles L. Taplin who accompanied Captain John Pope as Mineralogist on Pope's expedition in Texas in 1854. I don't know, however, if he is the Charlie Taplin mentioned in the letter. I also found the location of present-day Albiquiu in Northern New Mexico in the Sante Fe National Forest. I would appreciate it very much if you would send me any information about the expedition (if it took place) and about the author of the letter, or about the other men mentioned.

Thank you,

Susan Ayres

September 1, 1983

Mr. Lonn Taylor
c/o Museum of New Mexico
Division of Folk Art
Santa Fe, NM 87105

COPY

Dear Lonn,

Congratulations on your new position. I am not sure what it is, but I know that you have accepted a permanent(?) association with the museum. I know you will enjoy New Mexico and you will be good for them.

I am enclosing something I ran across recently that I felt like you would be very interested in. This is all the information in the files, including the 1981 letter and some notes by the researcher on a letter we have in our possession that is extremely intriguing. Pages 1, 2, 7 and 8 are not here. It is remotely possible that they might be in your collection. If so, or if you can use this in any way, I feel that it should be transferred to you because of its historical significance.

I am enjoying my new position here immensely. It is good to be able to teach again and get back into natural history and also to be free of state bureaucratic control over our lives.

I hope you will make an effort to stop in if you should get down into this area, and I will certainly let you know if and when I have an opportunity to come your way. Again, I wish you the best. Let me know if there is anything I can do here or be of service in any way.

Sincerely,

Calvin B. Smith
Director

CBS/pag

Enclosures

Museum of New Mexico

October 14, 1983

Calvin B. Smith
Director, Strecker Museum
Baylor University
Waco, Texas 76798

Dear Calvin,

Your kind letter came while I was on vacation and has only now come to my attention. Yes, I did accept a permanent position with the Museum of New Mexico last January, as Deputy Director for Collections and Research. It is a challenging job, as it does involve a good deal of interfacing with other state agencies as well as a major reorganization of the Museum itself.

The manuscript you enclose is certainly tantalizing. The only clues in it would seem to be the references to Charley Toplin, Alexis Godey, and Abiquiu. I am going to pass it on to Stanley Hordes, our state historian, and see if he has any ideas about it. I'll let you know what we can determine.

Thank you again for writing, Cal. I certainly will stop in the next time I am in Waco, and I extend the same invitation to you should you be coming this way.

Cordially,

Lonn

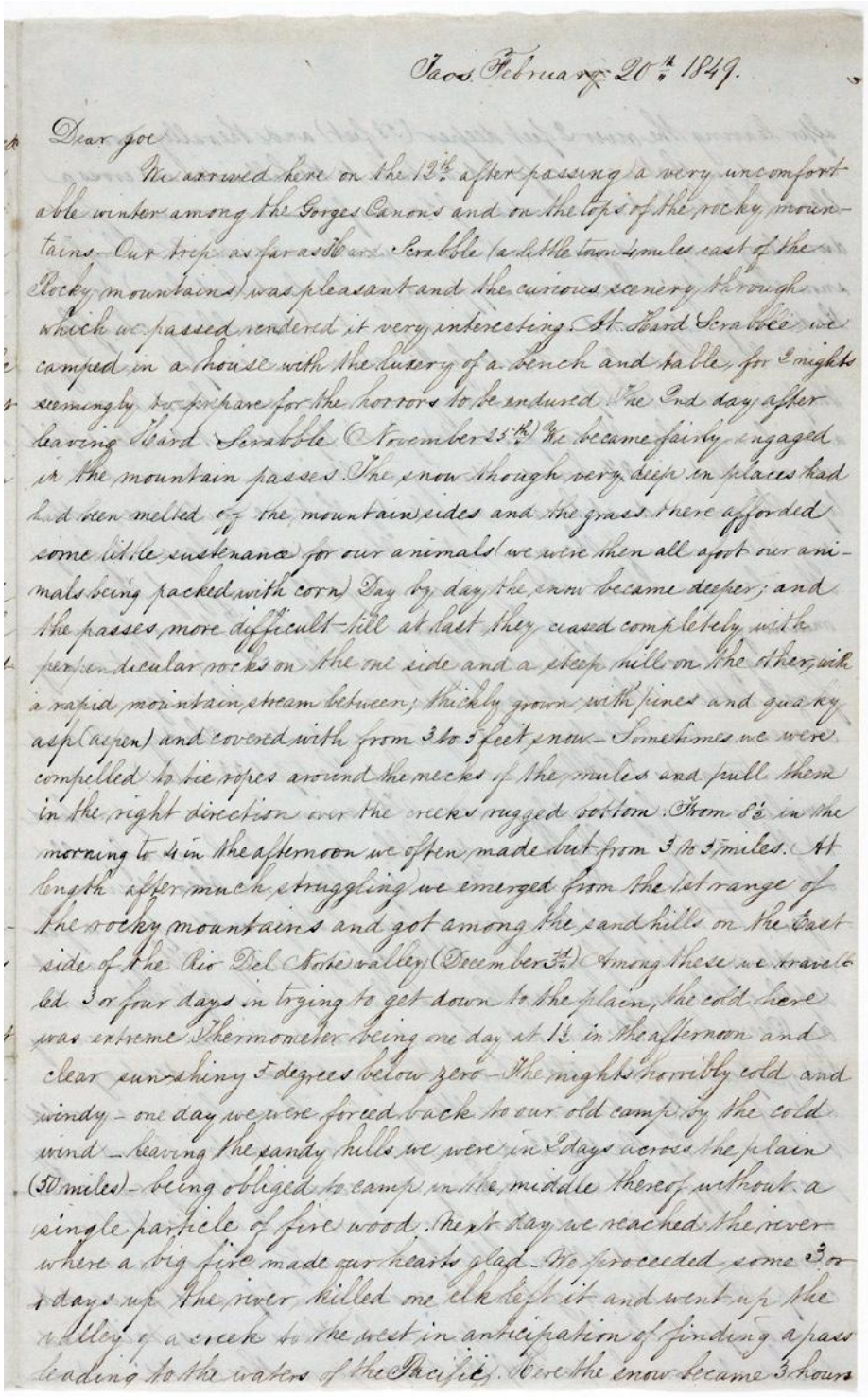
Lonn Taylor
Deputy Director for Collections & Research
Museum of New Mexico

LT/kg



*a division of the Office of Cultural Affairs Box 2087 Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503*

Appendix C

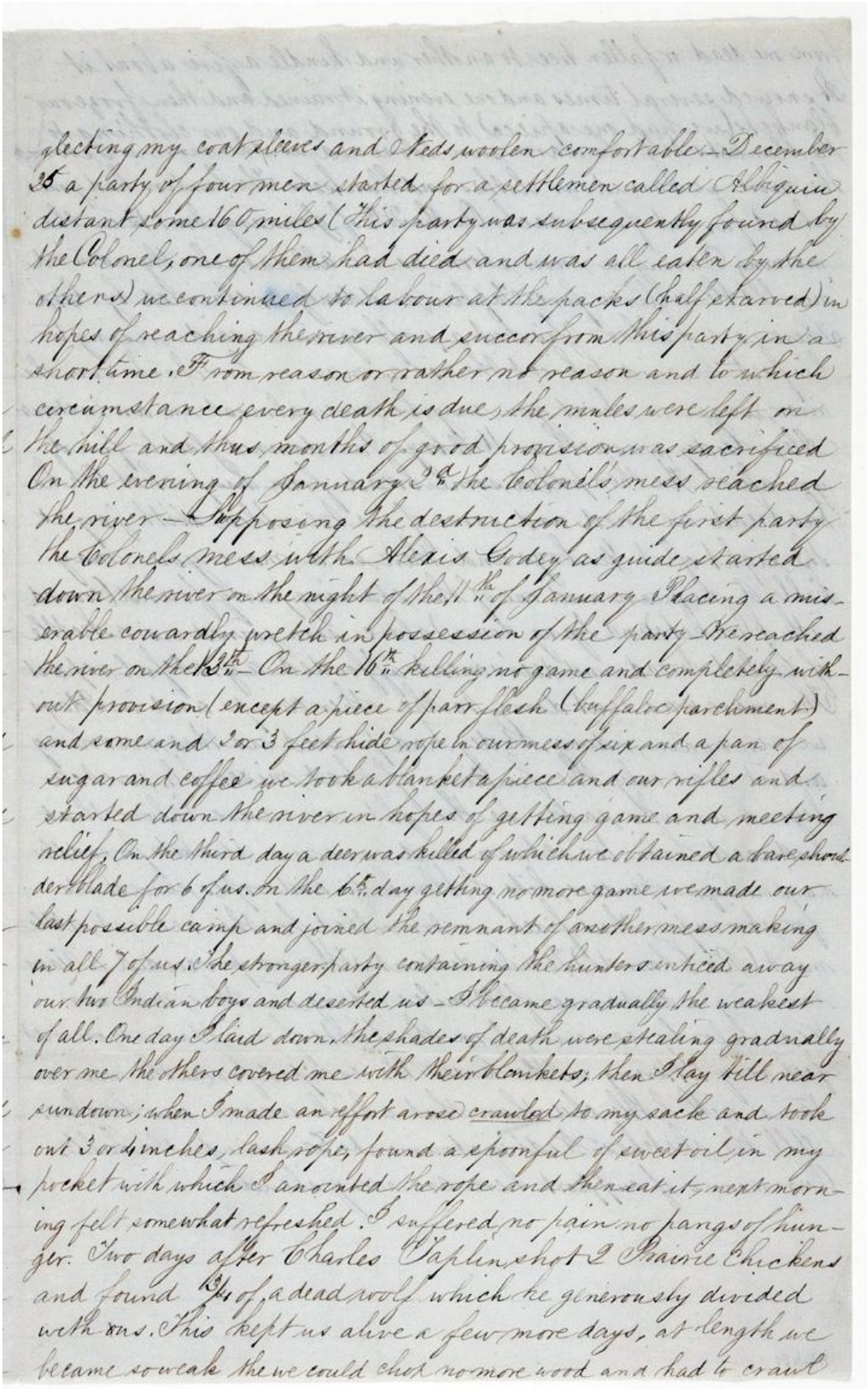


Taos February 20th 1849.

Dear Joe

We arrived here on the 12th after passing a very uncomfortable winter among the Gorges Canons and on the tops of the rocky mountains. Our trip as far as Bard Scrabble (a little town 4 miles east of the Rocky mountains) was pleasant and the curious scenery through which we passed rendered it very interesting. At Bard Scrabble we camped in a house with the luxury of a bench and table for 2 nights seemingly to prepare for the horrors to be endured. The 2nd day after leaving Bard Scrabble (November 25th) We became fairly engaged in the mountain passes. The snow though very deep in places had in a few been melted off the mountain sides and the grass there afforded some little sustenance for our animals (we were then all afoot our animals being packed with corn) Day by day the snow became deeper; and the passes more difficult till at last they ceased completely with perpendicular rocks on the one side and a steep hill on the other, with a rapid mountain stream between, thickly grown with pines and quaky asp (aspen) and covered with from 3 to 5 feet snow. Sometimes we were compelled to tie ropes around the necks of the mules and pull them in the right direction over the creeks rugged bottom. From 8 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon we often made but from 3 to 5 miles. At length after much struggling we emerged from the last range of the rocky mountains and got among the sand hills on the East side of the Rio Del Norte valley (December 3d) Among these we travelled 3 or four days in trying to get down to the plain, the cold here was extreme. Thermometer being one day at 15 in the afternoon and clear sunshiny 5 degrees below zero. The nights horribly cold and windy - one day we were forced back to our old camp by the cold wind - leaving the sandy hills we were in 2 days across the plain (30 miles) - being obliged to camp in the middle thereof without a single particle of fire wood. Next day we reached the river where a big fire made our hearts glad. We proceeded some 3 or 4 days up the river killed one elk kept it and went up the valley of a creek to the west in anticipation of finding a pass leading to the waters of the Pacific. Here the snow became 3 thousand

after leaving the river 2 feet deeper (35 feet) and the valley soon canoned so that we were forced to take to the hill sides and cross a bleak bald hill at an elevation of 5 or 6000 feet — our corn was fast dwindling away and grass and warm weather were where? A high snow clad ridge ahead was supposed (as the last had been) to be the dividing ridge and so we struck for it — (travelling chiefly in a North Easterly or Easterly direction and camped among the pines near the top — next day men were sent ahead to make a trail, and then the camp started for the top distant 3 miles which we reached in 3½ hours. — during a cold wind — when on the top the snow dust became so plenty that we could see nothing else — some of the men sat on the stones and began to freeze others became blind. It required the full energy of the remaining to turn camp back again on the trail to our former resting place, which we happily reached, all alive but many frost bitten. The next day a new route over the ridge was chosen, a trail beaten and again we started. The day cold and calm. towards 3 O'Clock we reached the top (3¾ miles) in a small grove of friendly pines — The animals were unpacked at the edge of a bleak windy hill — down which nearly all the snow from the mountain top blew and then driven again to the top of the ridge, to feed if they could upon a few scattering blades of grass — Mules dying rapidly — The greatest depth of the snow passed through that day was 13ft. The next day (December 18th.) I waked up and found 8 inches snow on my bed, peeped out and told Dick the expedition was destroyed and if we all got to some settlement without lives we would be doing well — On the 23rd men began to make trail and carry packs, a difficult undertaking on account of the great elevation which rendered our breathing very short and difficult. On Christmas we had all established in a 7 foot snow a new camp. The mules were yet on the mountain top and presented a sad spectacle having eaten each others manes, tails and backs, also such part of the baggage as they could not ne-



glecting my coat sleeves and Ieds woolen comfortable. December 25 a party of four men started for a settlemen called Abiguiu distant some 160 miles (This party was subsequently found by the Colonel, one of them had died and was all eaten by the others) we continued to labour at the packs (half starved) in hopes of reaching the river and succor from this party in a short time. From reason or rather no reason and to which circumstance every death is due, the mules were left on the hill and thus months of good provision was sacrificed On the evening of January 2d the Colonels mess reached the river — Supposing the destruction of the first party the Colonels mess with Alexis Godey as guide started down the river on the night of the 3d of January Placing a miserable cowardly wretch in possession of the party — We reached the river on the 13th — On the 16th killing no game and completely without provision (except a piece of parr flesh (buffaloe parchment) and some and 2 or 3 feet hide rope in our mess of six and a pan of sugar and coffee we took a blanket a piece and our rifles and started down the river in hopes of getting game and meeting relief, On the third day a deer was killed of which we obtained a bare shoulder blade for 6 of us. On the 6th day getting no more game we made our last possible camp and joined the remnant of another mess making in all 7 of us. The stronger party containing the hunters enticed away our two Indian boys and deserted us — I became gradually the weakest of all. One day I laid down, the shades of death were stealing gradually over me the others covered me with their blankets; then I lay till near sundown; when I made an effort arose crawled to my sack and took out 3 or 4 inches, lash rope, found a spoonful of sweet oil in my pocket with which I anointed the rope and then eat it, next morning felt somewhat refreshed. I suffered no pain no pangs of hunger. Two days after Charles Taplin shot 2 Prairie Chickens and found 3/4 of a dead wolf which he generously divided with us. This kept us alive a few more days, at length we became so weak that we could chop no more wood and had to crawl

from one dead or fallen tree to another and kindle a fire about it We snowed several times and one evening it rained and then froze our blankets (we had one apiece) to the ground and our clothing to the blankets till the warm sun loosened us. The more we starved the more we burned our clothes and blankets. The hunters had gone ahead far out of our reach. On the 28th of January about 12 in the morning During a snow storm as we all sat silently around our little willow fire Taplin suddenly exclaimed by God There is a halloo. Tis but a wolf again we said rising to his feet he said Christ there is a man on horseback over the river, we gave a shout you may be sure, almost in an instant Alexis Godey was with us. Well boys I am damned glad to find you alive. He then pulled some bread from his pocket Oh he has bread we cried and some of us trembled with joy at the sight of it Yes boys and there is a mare you may kill. A Mexican and one of the starving party found (covered with blankets and lying down) above soon joined us. a kettle of boiled bread and deer's meat afforded a grateful repast The mare was sent down to the other camp and in 2 days we were again riding. Godey had passed us that morning and it was only the finding of that miserable wretch beyond us who said he thought we were below that induced them to return and save us. blankets for saddles handkerchiefs suspenders, bits of blankets and ropes served us for stirrups, thus fixed we travelled for the nearest settlement (Rio Colorado) 70 miles distant. There we proceeded to Taos making a distance of 130 miles riding in this manner. We are slowly recovering from the effects of our starvation but feel very tottering in the knees We escaped from the mountains with little else than that which was on our backs. All the sketches & eds instruments &c are up the hill. Our means of support here are very slender.

HL651

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