



By Pat Toscano, LS

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Pathfinder: John Charles Frémont and the Course of American Empire, by Tom Chaffin

The history of the American West is full of controversial people and events. Enthusiasts of the subject, both professional and hobbyist, can spend many amicable but argumentative hours debating such figures as Wyatt Earp and Jessie James. Historical accounts of colorful figures like General George Custer, Crazy Horse, and Sitting Bull, and events like the Battle at the Little Bighorn River could alone fill a small library (a library in which some friends of mine would love to spend their idle hours). But when it comes down to the personalities themselves, modern observers may conclude that the famous explorers of the West led remarkably simple—even dull—lives in contrast to their flamboyant contemporaries, those Indian leaders, gunmen and soldiers whose legacies shaped the American West.

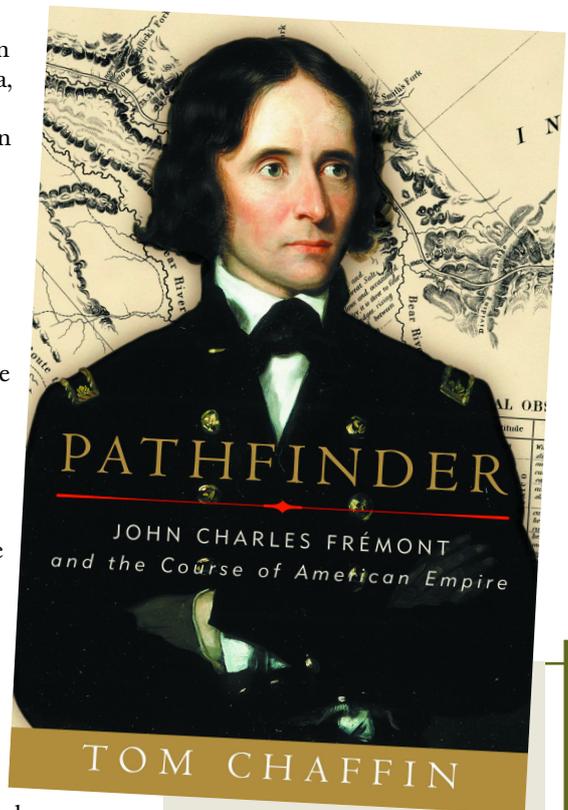
John Charles Frémont was unlike his professional contemporaries. Many resented his open and unabashed ambition and the way he constantly sought opportunity and advancement. He was a competent surveyor and mapmaker who used his professional accomplishments to further his other ambitions.

Frémont was one of the first senators from California. He was the first Republican Presidential candidate, running against James Buchanan in 1856 (he nearly won the election). He was involved in a political insurrection in California and later was appointed by President Lincoln as a Union General in the Civil War.

Frémont is probably the best-known explorer of the American West. The name

Frémont is found frequently on maps, particularly in California, and Frémont himself named a great many of the landmarks in the West. Having led such an impressive and dynamic life, it seems obvious that Frémont's place in history would be well known, however, the value of his life and contributions have been studied and debated for many years. I have come to the conclusion that he is someone historians love to hate. Even petty issues such as the nickname "Pathfinder" have been the subject of debate. It is a title Frémont never sought. He freely admitted that his mission was to map existing trails that were in use, never to pioneer new ones. His admirers gave him the appellation during his presidential campaign and it provided his detractors with another stone to throw.

It is said that the occupational hazard of the biographer is becoming so enamored of the subject that one loses all objectivity, but Chaffin's biography of this complex man is excellent. He clearly admires his subject and his sympathies creep in from time to time (Chaffin glosses over some controversial incidents, such as an attack on an Indian village in California that Frémont and Kit Carson participated in, and Frémont's quirky Civil War generalship, even though he has room enough for other, less significant events in the 550+ pages of the book). But overall this is a fair and balanced biography, well written and illustrated.



Title: *Pathfinder: John Charles Frémont and the Course of American Empire*

Author: Tom Chaffin

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I do wish the publisher had gone to the effort of including a full size copy of one of the expedition's maps drawn by topographer Charles Preuss, the sometime expedition topographer. They are beautiful and represent some of the very best in maps of that time and locale.

“It is an exciting, well-told story... a huge mess and a great tale.”

While reading this book, one quickly gets the impression that John C. Frémont was smart, hardworking and very, very lucky. Born in Savannah, Georgia on January 21, 1813, he grew up in modest circumstances in Charleston, South Carolina. He attended Charleston College but was kicked out due to poor attendance. In a time when family connections and position meant nearly everything, Frémont had neither. A friend of his mother's got him his first job working for the Army's topographic engineers. Frémont worked on a series of government surveys in the 1830s in the South and learned his craft so well that when an opportunity came up to work on an expedition to map the upper Mississippi with Joseph Nicollet, Frémont landed the assignment with the help of a friend. Several years later when Nicollet became too frail for further field work, Frémont, again with behind-the-scenes help, was selected to lead the expedition. He was always eager to work and always lucky enough to be around when an assignment came available. (It should be noted that later in life when Frémont was successful and famous and didn't need it, Charleston College gave him a degree.)

His first expedition to the Rocky Mountains in 1842 made him well known in Washington. His second expedition through the Sierra Nevada in 1843-44 made him an admired national figure. The report of the expedition, ghost written by his wife Jessie who was the daughter of Senator Thomas Hart Benton, was a national bestseller.

The third expedition takes up a large part of the book, as it should. In the summer of 1845 Frémont returned to California with 65 men on a mapping

expedition. He wound up participating in the government's semi-secret plan to seize California from Mexico. It is an exciting, well-told story of various government agents acting in concert and independently, American residents of California promoting the Union, Mexican citizens try-

ing to maintain their hold on the land, and native independent-minded Californians of Spanish heritage, called *Californios*, just wanting to be left alone. It was a huge mess and a great tale. Although Frémont was generally in good graces with the government, he began fighting with his superiors and wound up receiving a court-martial, which he survived, but later resigned from the Army. With the court-martial his luck changed, and even though he would lead two more

expeditions, one of which was a disastrous winter crossing of the Rockies with much loss of life, his career as an active explorer was over. What followed, aside from a lackluster generalship during the Civil War, was a life in politics and business for which he was ill suited.

He lost elections, lost government appointments and lost more than 44,000 acres of California real estate.

During his hard times his critics and political enemies multiplied and, of course, he had also made many enemies during his active days in the field. But his loyal core of friends, many of them old crew members, remained true, particularly Kit Carson. In spite of wildly oscillating political and business careers, the friendships and accomplishments he left behind may be the best measure of his life. Frémont died in New York City on July 13, 1890. Chaffin has assembled from that life a great story and great book. *A*



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