

CHIMNEY ROCK

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“at this place was a singular phenomenon, which is among the curiosities of the country. It is called the Chimney.

The lower part is a conical mound rising out of the naked plain; from the summit shoots up a shaft or column, about one hundred and twenty feet in height, from which it derives its name. The height of the whole . . . is a hundred and seventy five yards . . . and may be seen at the distance of upwards of thirty miles.”

Capt. Benjamin Bonneville, 1832

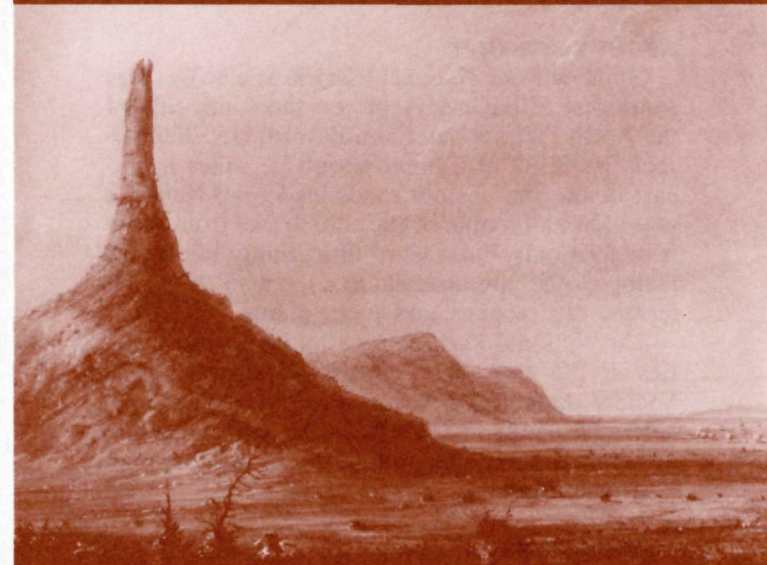
A spire of solitary grandeur, visible for miles to travelers of the onstretching prairie, Chimney Rock was a celebrated landmark on the Oregon Trail. Of all the curious rock formations along the trunkline of the trail, none drew more comment from 19th century travelers than this one. Yet to the emigrant it was more than a wonder of nature. As an oft-described milepost on a journey noted for its monotony, the column eased the emigrant's way westward by heralding his progress and recalling the descriptions and sketches of earlier travelers.

Chimney Rock early became a guide for “mountain men”—Rocky Mountain trappers and traders—on their seasonal travels between the Rockies and the Missouri River trading posts. The first white men to see the column were probably Robert Stuart and his small group of traders on their way back from Astoria in the Oregon Country in 1813. Fourteen years later, 1827, the first recorded use of the name occurred in Joshua Pilcher's report on his journey up the Platte Valley to the Salt Lake rendezvous of the fur trappers.

Among chroniclers of the landmark are names famous in the annals of American expansion into the West: Captain Bonneville in 1832, William Anderson and William Sublette in 1834, the Congregational missionary Samuel Parker in 1835, the artist Alfred J. Miller in 1837, Father De Smet in 1840 and again in 1841. Charles Preuss of Frémont's expedition in 1842, members of Gen. Stephen Kearny's dragoons in 1845, the historian Francis Parkman in 1846, and the pioneer artist and photographer William Henry Jackson in 1866.

But it is in the journals of hundreds of covered-wagon emigrants that Chimney Rock's importance to the pioneers can best be gauged. From far out on the plains, wagon train outriders could see the spire. To them it signaled that the second phase of their long journey west—the difficult mountain passage—was about to begin. More immediately, the rock offered respite to weary emigrants heading for homes in Oregon, gold fields in California, or Mormon havens in Utah. The spectacular shaft marked a good camping spot with a dependable spring.

So intrigued were the emigrants that thousands clambered up the cone to carve their names on the tower. Many passersby on the north side of the river waded over just to climb “this great natural curiosity.” Though no inscriptions are known to survive today, there is ample testimony that thousands of names once adorned the rock.



Courtesy Walters Art Gallery. © 1951. Univ. of Oklahoma Press

When Alfred J. Miller painted Chimney Rock in 1837 (above), it was already a noted landmark of the West. A comparison between this and other 19th century sketches and the rock's present appearance makes it clear that erosion has further cut down its height in recent times, though the exact amount is in dispute. It is likely that the rock's present contours will last a good many more centuries.

Today the column towers 500 feet above the nearby North Platte River. Emigrants referred to it as “marl” or “earthy sandstone.” A more accurate description is that the rock is composed of Brule clay, interlaid with volcanic ash and Arickaree sandstone. The presence of this hard sandstone in the upper strata probably explains the column's resistance to erosion while the surrounding clay weathered away, leaving the tower detached from the main ridge.

