

# A Favorite Map: Abert and Peck's 1845 Exploration of the Southwest

By Wesley A. Brown

It was an opportunity for adventure, discovery, and service to the nation. In 1845, young Lieutenants James W. Abert and William G. Peck explored the rugged terrain of an area that today includes southeastern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, the Panhandle of Texas, and Oklahoma. The following year, they produced a map of their exploration. [Figure 1] The *Map Showing the Route Pursued by the Exploring Expedition to*

*New Mexico and the Southern Rocky Mountains* depicts what was then the desolate corner where three countries joined: the Republic of Texas, Mexico, and the southwestern edge of the United States. Fifteen years later, much of the land shown on the map became the Territory of Colorado. No other map of this quality had ever focused on this area. As a Colorado native, I rate this map as one of my favorites.



**Figure 1.** *Map Showing the Route pursued by the Exploring Expedition to New Mexico and the Southern Rocky Mountains* Made under the Orders of Captain J. C. Fremont U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers and conducted by Lieut. J. W. Abert, assisted by Lieut. W. G. Peck, U.S.T.E. during the year 1845. Image from author's collection.

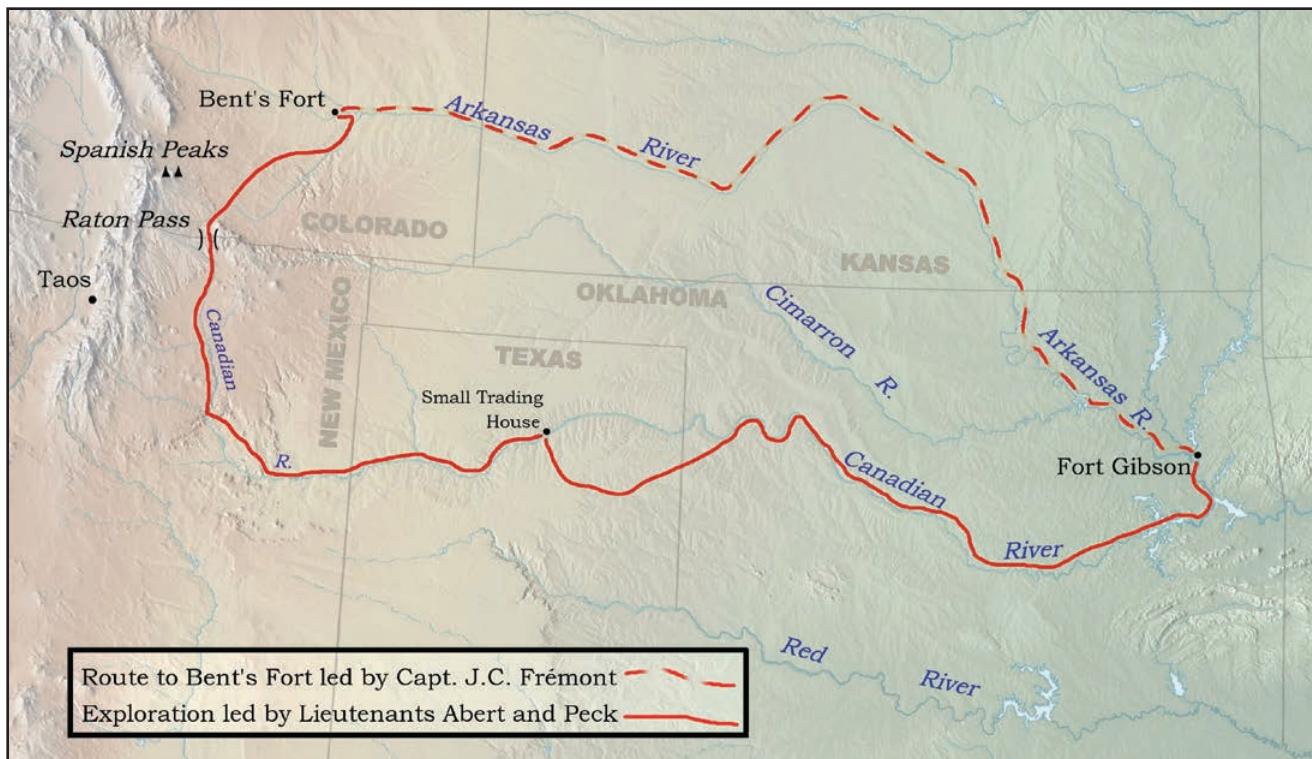


**Figure 2.** Lt. James William Abert, 1820–1897.  
Ruthven Deane Collection, Prints & Photographs  
Division, Library of Congress, LC-USZ61-2173.

The journal of the expedition that Abert kept for the U.S. Senate displays his keen talent for observation, special insights into the native population, a love of science and nature in addition to recording his exciting adventures. [Figure 2] As an armchair traveler, you can smell the sagebrush and feel the baking sun on your neck as you read through the daily log of their ten-week enterprise.

The historical background surrounding this map is important to understanding it. [Figure 3] In 1845, the United States was engaged in the process of annexing the Republic of Texas. As a result, war with Mexico was imminent, and the U.S. government felt great urgency to obtain geographical information about the potential areas of conflict. It was imperative to better understand the course of the west-to-east flowing Arkansas River, vital to the Santa Fe Trail, and for years an international boundary, first with Mexico, then with the Republic of Texas. Of equal importance was the course of the Canadian River, which roughly parallels the Arkansas, about 150 miles to its south. Given the state of diplomacy at that time, the previously uncharted desolate land—the primary range of the fierce Comanche and Kiowa Native Americans—could become a theater of war.<sup>1</sup>

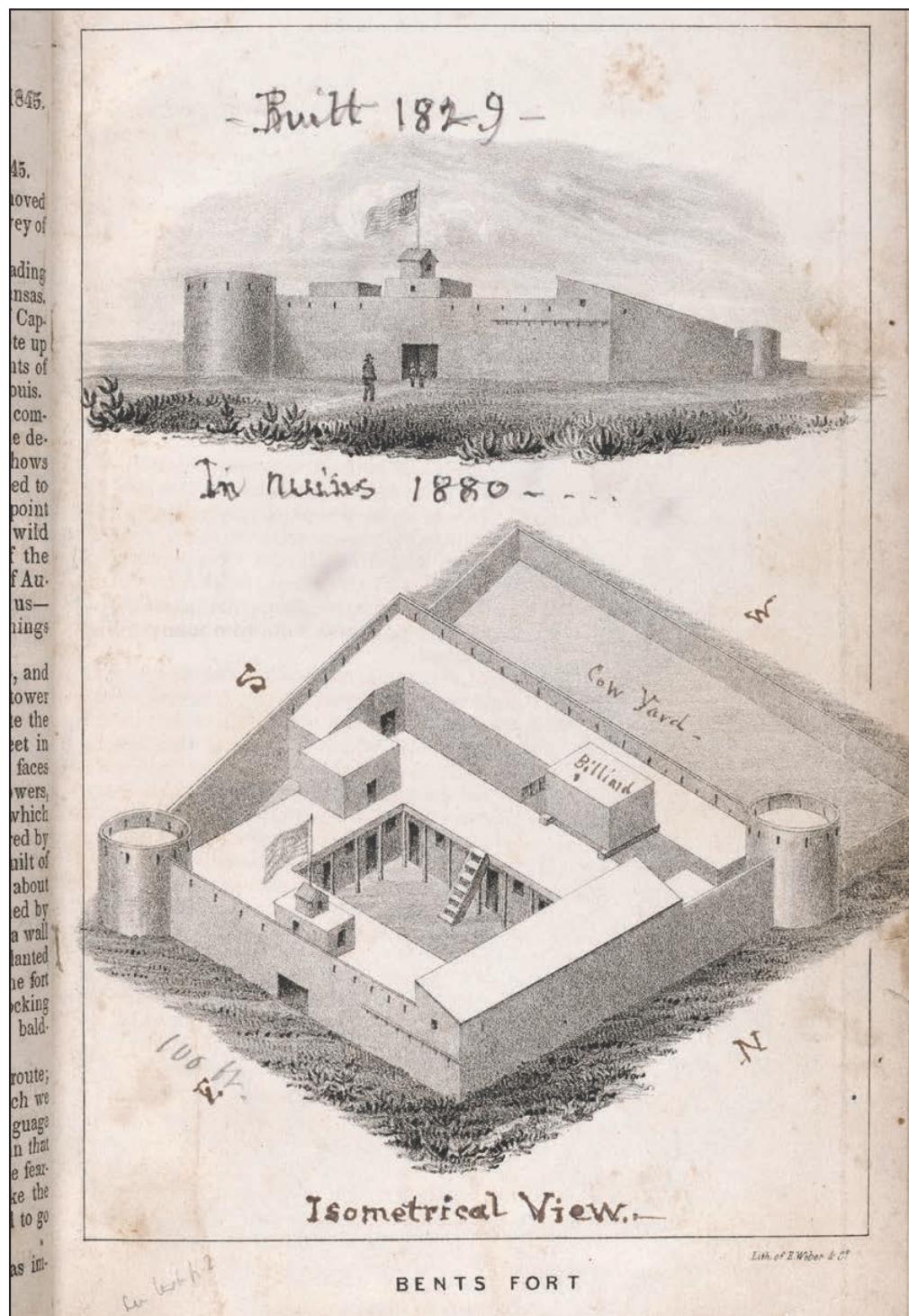
To explore the relevant territory, Colonel John James Abert, commander of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers and also Lieutenant James W. Abert's father,



**Figure 3.** Map showing the route of the Abert and Peck expedition, 1845. Image from author's collection.

ordered Captain John Charles Frémont—who recently had led two renowned western expeditions—to survey the Arkansas River, the Canadian River, and if possible, the mighty Red River. On June 20, 1845, the Frémont party began its march to Bent's Fort, the first destination. Abert and Peck, assigned as assistants, traveled with Frémont, now on his third western expedition. Shortly after they

arrived, Abert, an accomplished artist, produced a fine sketch and plan of the fort located on the north side, which was the U.S. side, of the upper Arkansas River. Since 1834, Bent's Fort had been the principal trading post for many of the Plains Indians for hundreds of miles in all directions. Abert's drawing, reproduced in the journal, constitutes one of the best images extant. [Figure 4].



**Figure 4.** Bent's Fort, drawn by J. W. Abert in 1845. *Message from the President of the United States: In Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate, Communicating a Report of an Expedition led by Lieutenant Abert, on the Upper Arkansas and Through the Country of the Comanche Indians, in the Fall of the Year 1845.* [Washington, DC, 1846]. Zc20 846un. From the catalog record: "Copy 2 was James W. Abert's personal copy and ... is also extra illustrated with 12 plates of watercolors of Indians attributed to James W. Abert, which were never published." Yale Collection of Western Americana. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

The two lieutenants were soon abandoned by Frémont. As was typical of his behavior, Frémont disobeyed orders and instead took most of his command to California, redirecting his attentions to what would become a key battleground in the war with Mexico in 1846. Frémont ordered the twenty-four-year-old Lieutenant Abert, assisted by Lieutenant Peck, the same age, to lead the remaining party to explore the Canadian River to the south, a wonderful opportunity for these young officers to be in command.

Historian William Goetzmann remarks that "Peck was possessed of outstanding mathematical ability and had ranked first in his West Point class."<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Abert seems to have excelled in collecting demerits at West Point and ranked fifty-fifth among the fifty-six cadets in his graduating class. Yet he gained the respect of his men and by the conclusion of the Civil War held the rank of major. What he lacked in mathematics, Abert clearly excelled in leadership and in his worldly view informed by extensive reading, idealism, and fine writing ability. In the journal entry for August 23, 1845, he writes,

I cannot conclude the day without again alluding to the scenery. Every moment our eyes were arrested by the imposing grandeur of the precipitous cliffs which walled us in on either side, and the beautiful stream which danced along from rock to rock, whilst continually several small rivulets, borne from the cool springs of the mountain side, burst from the dark dells where they seem to lurk, and joined in the merry dance of the crystal waters. There was not one in our party who did not feel well repaid for the trying hardships he had endured on the sandy wastes of the prairie.<sup>3</sup>

At Bent's Fort, Abert engaged three experienced mountain men. Serving as guide was legendary Irish-American Thomas "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick. He had just completed guiding the Kearny expedition along the North Platte and then down the eastern foothills of the Colorado Rockies where Kearny left him at the fort. The other two mountain men, John Hatcher, an Indian trader well known to the Kiowa, and Caleb Greenwood, a dead shot, were hired as hunters. This company of thirty-three men began its exploration on August 12, 1845. When they crossed to the south side of the Arkansas River to begin their trek, they left what was then Indian Territory, part of the United States, and entered the Republic of Texas, which was still jostling with Mexico for official claim of this western land and in the process of being annexed to the United States. This land is today southeastern Colorado. They followed the so-called Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail, ascending Timpas Creek and the Purgatory River southwest,

then south over "Raton Pass," named on their map for the first time. [Figure 5] This important pass is today the channel over which Interstate Highway 25 connects the states of Colorado and New Mexico. Just south of the pass, they reached the headwaters of the Canadian River, which they followed about a hundred miles as it flows southward and gradually bends to the east.

As they traveled, they sought to meet with Indians to gather geographic information and had many such encounters. Most of the trip along the Canadian River and a detour to the Washita River was through hostile Comanche and Kiowa territory at the northern edge of the famous El Llano Estacado, or Staked Plains of Texas. This land was part of Texas in name only, still belonging fully to these tribes, with but one newly built small trading house as the only permanent habitation for hundreds of miles. Hatcher and Greenwood were adopted members of the Kiowa Tribe, which reduced their risk of being attacked. But on September 16, leaving all three guides behind at the small trading house, the company veered southward from the Canadian River to find the headwaters of the Washita. This route led them into terrain that was fiercely defended by Comanche and Kiowa. After trekking through a desolate landscape, they reached a stream



**Figure 5.** Detail showing route taken from August 12 to September 2, 1845 by Abert and Peck from Bent's Fort to the junction of Utah Creek and the Canadian River. Image from author's collection.



**Figure 6.** Detail showing the most hostile section of the Canadian River for potential attack and the parties side excursion to find the Washita River from September 16 to 24, 1845. Image from author's collection.

flowing from the west they supposed was the Washita River, that was labeled as such on their map. [Figure 6] (It is, in fact, the North Fork of the Red River.) The Red River had been an important political boundary and understanding its headwaters was long a matter of great national interest, but clarity about the Red would have to wait for other explorations.

As they moved on, now northeastward, they soon crossed the Sweetwater, a tributary of the Red. On September 23, they finally crossed a small northern branch of the Washita, a day before they regained the Canadian River. From here, they continued eastward along the Canadian into Oklahoma where the terrain became less desolate and the threat from hostile tribes diminished. They concluded their 600-mile trek where the Canadian River joins the Arkansas at Fort Gibson on October 22 without loss of life.

It was this side excursion from September 16 through 24 that was most challenging, as they were without guides, had no prior mapping, and were in the most hostile terrain for potential attack. Abert's journal for September 17 opens: "This is the day which we shall look back upon in our wanderings as the day of anxiety ... we entered upon the famous table-land known to the Spaniards as 'El Llano Estacado' [Staked Plains]." As they traveled for hours, Abert writes, "our tongues seemed to cleave to the roofs of our mouths, and our throats were parched with dryness. The rude joke and boisterous laugh had long since died away, and the 'hep' of the driver, as he urged his panting team, under the scorching sun, grew fainter and fainter, until we moved on in dead silence." Abert describes the remarkable emotions that desperate travelers experience:

The idea of having been misled evidently began to steal into our minds, though not a word was spoken ... This sort of depression, akin to fear, is contagious; and as we pursued our way each one examined his rifle, and closed in with the main body. An Indian, mounted, now appeared, and as he swept along the horizon, looked as a very giant; another and another burst upon our view, on every side, which led us to believe that we were surrounded.

This longest day eventually led them to a stream of the North Fork of the Red River with fresh water and grass. "The camp was completely metamorphosed from gloomy despair to glad delight. Some laughed, some whistled, others sung" as they descended to the river. Abert concludes, "The day, which had begun in gloom and despair, ended in joyful mirth; a fact that shows the contagious nature of both fear and joy, as well as illustrates the sudden changes a man's mind may undergo."<sup>4</sup>

Upon arriving in Washington, Abert and Peck prepared the findings and observations, which included two manuscript maps, their field notes, and tables of astronomical calculations (still in the National Archives).<sup>5</sup> Based on this work, Charles Preuss produced the final map to be published. [Figure 1] Preuss, brilliant but moody, was a German-trained topographer for the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers. He accompanied Frémont on three of his expeditions and produced all his maps, which gained such renown. Abert finalized his journal, which along with the map was urgently required by the military. The journal was published for the U.S. Senate in 1846 along with the map titled *Map Showing the Route pursued by the Exploring Expedition to New Mexico and the*



**Figure 7.** "Wah-to-yah, or The Spanish Peaks" in southcentral Colorado by J. W. Abert. *Message from the President of the United States: In Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate, Communicating a Report of an Expedition led by Lieutenant Abert, on the Upper Arkansas and Through the Country of the Comanche Indians, in the Fall of the Year 1845.* [Washington, DC, 1846]. Zc20 846un. From the catalog record: "Copy 2 was James W. Abert's personal copy and ... is also extra illustrated with 12 plates of watercolors of Indians attributed to James W. Abert, which were never published." Yale Collection of Western Americana. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

*Southern Rocky Mountains Made under the Orders of Captain J.C. Frémont U.S. Topographical Engineers and conducted by Lieut J.W. Abert, assisted by Lieut. W.G. Peck, U.S.T.E. during the year 1845.*

Abert and Peck were very careful to give attribution to others for the various parts of their map as can be seen in this comment:

The Geography of that portion of Country lying between the Arkansas and Canadian Rivers is laid down from information obtained from the Comanche and Kiowa Indians, and confirmed by Mr. Simpson. The Santa Fe Road, from the crossing of the Arkansas River and the Arkansas River, from Bents Fort to the Pawnee Rock, are laid down as surveyed by Lieut. Franklin U.S.T.E. The Streams north of the Arkansas, are represented as laid down by Captain J.C. Frémont, U.S.T.E. The portions of Santa Fe and Taos are laid down from Mr. Gregg.<sup>6,7</sup>

The map was created first and foremost to illustrate Abert and Peck's 1845 exploration and mapping of the Arkansas River and especially the Canadian River. This geographic region fills the lower half of the published map. The upper half shows the land to the north explored by Frémont in 1842, 1843, and 1844. In fact, the original steel plate for the 1845 Frémont map was used again by Preuss to make the Abert map and the area north of the Arkansas River is virtually identical.<sup>8</sup> The bottom half of the map would have been sufficient to illustrate all the new lands surveyed by Abert and Peck. It is a mystery why the northern half of the map was added by Preuss, because it had just recently been published as part of a larger map by Frémont to wide acclaim. But the mystery is a happy one from my standpoint as this configuration allows the Abert and Peck map to cover much of what would become the Territory of Colorado fifteen years later.<sup>9</sup>

The party was the first to professionally survey the Canadian River using scientific instruments. Their map



**Figure 8.** "MIS-STAN-STAR, A Cheyenne," a watercolor made by J. W. Abert. *Message from the President of the United States: In Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate, Communicating a Report of an Expedition led by Lieutenant Abert, on the Upper Arkansas and Through the Country of the Camanche Indians, in the Fall of the Year 1845.* [Washington, DC, 1846]. Zc20 846un. From the catalog record: "Copy 2 was James W. Abert's personal copy and ... is also extra illustrated with 12 plates of watercolors of Indians attributed to James W. Abert, which were never published." Yale Collection of Western Americana. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

was very well executed, and the outstanding astronomical observations completed by Peck allowed the depiction of the Canadian to be within four miles of actual

coordinates.<sup>10</sup> An interesting feature of the map is the land between the Arkansas and the Canadian Rivers, then virtually unknown. This area includes distance ranging from 100 to 175 miles north to south between the circuit of Abert and Peck's travel. The only features noted in this vast space on the map are various rivers drawn with dashed lines to indicate uncertainty. It is fortunate that Abert and Peck hedged their bets. For example, they showed the east flowing "Cimmeron River" (Cimarron) as mistakenly joining the North Fork of the Canadian River. In fact, the Cimarron flows on a more eastward path and joins the Arkansas separately, never entering the Canadian River system.<sup>11</sup>

Abert's considerable talent as an artist was recognized when he later became an art instructor at West Point to young cadets, especially those destined for the Corps of Topographical Engineers. During the exploration he produced over 100 field sketches in pencil and forty watercolor paintings recording the complex terrain with precise locations noted to aid in producing the detail on the map.<sup>12</sup> Ten of these images were engraved and published with the journal and map as well as a detailed map of the Raton Pass area and the plan of Bents Fort [Figure 4]. One engraved image titled "Wah-to-yah, or The Spanish Peaks" features the two most prominent peaks in southeastern Colorado and then, untypically, seven additional smaller peaks descending in the distance. [Figure 7] This unusual presentation is also placed on the map. The map includes additional Indian names such as "Goo-Al-Pah or Canadian River." Here Abert uses his own spelling of the Kiowa name Gúadal P'a for the river as well as its English name. Historian John Miller Morris explains that the name "Canadian" for the river comes not from the eighteenth-century French explorers who traveled its banks, but rather is a corruption of a traditional Spanish term *cañada* meaning "sheepwalk" and refers to the river's serpentine nature and steep walled sides.<sup>13</sup> Many of the sketches and watercolors are of the natives they met along the way. A representative example of Abert's watercolors is a portrait of Owl Woman, a Cheyenne and first wife of William Bent, of Bent's Fort. [Figure 8].

My copy of this map illustrated as Figure 1 is exceptional in that it is an original hand-colored version. Abert not only drew and painted terrain and images but also practiced and taught techniques for coloring topographical maps to enhance their ability to convey information. This map is in the manner of map-coloring used by the Army Corps of Engineers during the mid-nineteenth century and was probably colored by Abert.<sup>14</sup>

I have long loved this map, but when I read the journal and the details of the daily march, the vivid story of the expedition emerged. Abert's writing provided geographical observation, admiring accounts of flora and fauna,

and the drama of their adventure. Abert's sketches of individual Indians he met along the way, many in water-color, combined with his descriptions of them, provide keen observation of the various Indian tribes they met. The map is by itself an important cartographic achievement, but it is the enjoyable journal that makes the map a precious document.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Wesley A. Brown*, a member of the Society, co-founded the Rocky Mountain Map Society in 1991. He has been an avid map collector for over 40 years, specializing in early world maps and maps of the exploration and development of Colorado and the west. A resident of Denver, Colorado, Wes has published many articles on maps and is currently active with the International Map Collectors Society, organizing their annual international symposium, and serves as Treasurer of the Society for the History of Discoveries..

## ENDNOTES

- 1 William H. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West 1803–1863* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 130. Goetzmann reports that when preparing for the invasion of New Mexico and California in 1846 during the war with Mexico, William Emory, the topographer for General Kearny, took along Abert's report and map.
- 2 Goetzmann, 124.
- 3 *Journal of Lieutenant J.W. Abert, from Bent's Fort to St. Louis, in 1845*, 29th Cong. 1st sess., Senate Executive Document 438 (Washington, DC, 1846), 47.
- 4 Abert, 48–49.
- 5 Carl I. Wheat, *Mapping the Transmississippi West 1540–1861* (San Francisco: Institute of Historical Cartography, 1958), 2:194.
- 6 Mr. J. N. Simpson was likely a local guide that Abert met with at Bent's Fort when interviewing Kiowa elder Tah-kai-buhl for insight about the little understood area between the Arkansas and Canadian Rivers. This information was enhanced in a council with Kiowa on September 18th. Abert may have referenced Simpson to provide the impression of greater authority to what was essentially Native information.
- 7 Abert and Peck state on their map that they used the "survey" of Lieut. W. B. Franklin to illustrate the Arkansas River and its few tributaries from Bent's Fort down to Pawnee Rock (in today's central Kansas where the Santa Fe Trail leaves the Arkansas River on its way northeastward to Independence, Missouri). A few months earlier than Abert and Peck's exploration, beginning May 18, 1845, Franklin accompanied Col. Stephen W. Kearny on an exploration of the U.S. 1st Dragoons from Ft. Leavenworth west on the Platte River to South Pass, (essentially retracing Frémont's expedition of 1843) then back to Ft. Laramie and south along the Front Range of Colorado to the Arkansas River, returning August 23<sup>rd</sup>. The Franklin map published following the expedition is small with limited detail. It must have been Franklin's more detailed field notes for his "survey" and astronomical observations that were of use to Abert and Peck as they stated on their map.
- 8 The only differences are (1) the route information from Frémont's earlier expeditions is removed and (2) some of the dashed lines on the Frémont 1845 map are replaced with solid lines.
- 9 Only two features in the Colorado area are shown for the first time on the 1846 map. The first is the indication of "Dry Creek" draining from the north into the Arkansas River that is most likely Black Squirrel Creek (eventually renamed Kramer Creek). The second and more important difference is that Raton Pass is shown on the map for the first time.
- 10 For this conclusion we are indebted to the extensive on-site investigations of the campsites of the Abert and Peck expedition by Dr. H. Bailey Carroll referenced in extensive footnotes, especially footnote 325, p. 113. Lieutenant James William Abert, *Expedition to the Southwest* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).
- 11 It is interesting to compare the confused treatment of this area by Josiah Gregg, whose 1844 map was by far the best map of the area to that date, to the map of Rufus Sage published in the same year as Abert and Peck's. Sage at least corrects one error; he shows the Cimarron correctly flowing to the Arkansas. What Gregg shows as "Rio Naturia or North Fork of Canadian River," is called "Rio Naturia" by Sage and "North Fork of the Canadian" by Abert and Peck.
- 12 A treasure of images and paintings produced by Abert was published in John Galvin, ed., *Through the Country of The Comanche Indians in the Fall of the year 1845* (San Francisco: John Howell Books, 1970).
- 13 John Miller Morris, introduction to Abert, *Expedition to the Southwest*, viii.
- 14 Ralph Ehrenberg, former Chief of the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress, is an authoritative scholar on U.S. Army mapping of the western United States and a student of preparation of maps and their color by the Corps of Topographical Engineers. He has carefully examined this map and believes the map was most likely hand-painted by James Abert.

