

JOHN C. FREMONT

(January 31, 1813--July 13, 1890)

Defeated for the Presidency in 1856 by James Buchanan

As a presidential nominee, he was an also-ran. As a major general, he was removed from command by President Lincoln for conduct unbecoming an officer. As a businessman, he was a chronic bankrupt. But as a surveyor and explorer of the American West, he stands on the summit. His name was John Charles Fremont.

Born of an unconventional union between an aristocratic Virginia mother and an itinerant French emigre father, Fremont spent much of his life in unconventional pursuits. Expelled from college at 18 for "incorrigible negligence." Fremont signed on as an instructor of mathematics for a South American cruise on an American sloop of war.

In 1838 he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the U.S. Topographical Corps, taking part in an expedition to Minnesota and the Dakotas. Three years later he secretly married Jessie Benton, 16-year-old daughter of Sen. Thomas H. Benton of Missouri. Outraged at first, Benton soon became a zealous supporter of his venturesome son-in-law's western explorations.

During the period from 1842 to 1844 Fremont headed two extremely important government expeditions across the Great Plains and over the Continental Divide into Oregon. On the second trip he returned east by way of California's San Joaquin Valley. His reports of these trips were masterly, receiving wide acclaim.

He subsequently made two more expeditions into the Far West but added little new knowledge. When the Mexican War broke out, Capt. Fremont served bravely and capably, becoming for a brief time the first civilian governor of California. His refusal to obey his superior officer led to his court-martial for disobedience and mutiny, President Polk extended executive clemency, but Fremont refused to accept it.

When the first Republican presidential nominating convention met in 1856, party leaders sought a prominent candidate rather than a politically committed one. They found him in Fremont. The issue was slavery. Fremont was firmly against it. Buchanan characteristically took no stand at all.

The Democrats won, Buchanan getting 1,838 million votes to Fremont's 1,340 million. Millard Fillmore, the Know-Nothing and Whig nominee, polled 874,534 votes. Ominously, all but 1,200 of Fremont's votes came from the non-slavery states.

Characteristically, the "Pathfinder" had broken the trail for others. In 1860 the victorious Abraham Lincoln started the Republicans on a 24-year reign of the nation.