

**DIARY OF THE WASHBURN  
EXPEDITION TO THE  
YELLOWSTONE AND FIREHOLE  
RIVERS IN THE YEAR 1870**

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Diary of the Washburn Expedition to the Yellowstone and Firehole Rivers in the Year 1870 by  
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**NATHANIEL PITT LANGFORD**

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Henry D Washburn  
1869

DIARY  
OF THE  
WASHBURN EXPEDITION  
TO THE  
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RIVERS

IN THE YEAR 1870

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BY  
NATHANIEL PITT LANGFORD  
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## INTRODUCTION.

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When the rumored discovery in the year 1861 of extensive gold placers on Salmon river was confirmed, the intelligence spread through the states like wild fire. Hundreds of men with dependent families, who had been thrown out of employment by the depressed industrial condition of the country and by the Civil War, and still others actuated by a thirst for gain, utilized their available resources in providing means for an immediate migration to the land of promise. Before midsummer they had started on the long and perilous journey. How little did they know of its exposures! The deserts, destitute of water and grass, the alkaline plains where food and drink were alike affected by the poisonous dust, the roving bands of hostile Indians, the treacherous quicksands of river fords, the danger and difficulty of the mountain passes, the death of their companions, their cattle and their horses, breakage of their vehicles, angry and often violent personal altercations—all these fled in the light of the summer sun, the vernal beauty of the plains and the delightfully pure atmosphere which wooed them day by day farther away from the abode of civilization and the protection of law. The most fortunate of this army

of adventurers suffered from some of these fruitful causes of disaster. So certain were they to occur in some form that a successful completion of the journey was simply an escape from death. The story of the Indian murders and cruelties alone, which befell hundreds of these hapless emigrants, would fill volumes. Every mile of the several routes across the continent was marked by the decaying carcasses of oxen and horses, which had perished during the period of this hejira to the gold mines. Three months with mules and four with oxen were necessary to make the journey—a journey now completed in five days from ocean to ocean by the railroad. Some of these expeditions, after entering the unexplored region which afterwards became Montana, were arrested by the information that it would be impossible to cross with wagon teams the several mountain ranges between them and the mines.

In the summer of 1862 a company of 130 persons left St. Paul for the Salmon river mines. This Northern overland expedition was confided to the leadership of Captain James L. Fisk, whose previous frontier experience and unquestionable personal courage admirably fitted him for the command of an expedition which owed so much of its final success, as well as its safety during a hazardous journey through a region occupied by hostile Indians, to the vigilance and discipline of its commanding officer. E. H. Burritt was first assistant, the writer was second assistant and commissary, and Samuel R. Bond was secretary. Among those who were selected for guard duty were David E. Folsom, Patrick Doherty (Baptiste), Robert C. Knox, Patrick Bray, Cornelius Bray, Ard Godfrey, and many other well known pioneers of Montana. We started with ox teams on this journey on the 16th day of June, traveling by the way of Fort Abercrombie, old Fort Union, Milk river and Fort Benton, bridging all the streams not fordable on the entire route. Fort Union and



Fort Benton were not United States military forts, but were the old trading posts of the American Fur Company.

This Northern overland route of over 1,600 miles, lay for most of the distance through a partially explored region, filled with numerous bands of the hostile Sioux Indians. It was the year of the Sioux Indian massacre in Minnesota. After a continuous journey of upwards of eighteen weeks we reached Grasshopper creek near the head of the Missouri on the 23d day of October, with our supply of provisions nearly exhausted, and with cattle sore-footed and too much worn out to continue the journey. There we camped for the winter in the midst of the wilderness, 400 miles from the nearest settlement or postoffice, from which we were separated by a region of mountainous country, rendered nearly impassable in the winter by deep snows, and beset for the entire distance by hostile Indians. Disheartening as the prospect was, we felt that it would not do to give way to discouragement. A few venturesome prospectors from the west side of the Rocky Mountains had found gold in small quantities on the bars bordering the stream, and a few traders had followed in their wake with a limited supply of the bare necessities of life, risking the dangers of Indian attack by the way to obtain large profits as a rightful reward for their temerity. Flour was worth 75 cents per pound in greenbacks, and prices of other commodities were in like proportion, and the placer unpromising; and many of the unemployed started out, some on foot, and some bestride their worn-out animals, into the bleak mountain wilderness, in search of gold. With the certainty of death in its most horrid form if they fell into the hands of a band of prowling Blackfeet Indians, and the thought uppermost in their minds that they could scarcely escape freezing, surely the hope which sustained this little band of wanderers lacked none of those grand elements which sustained the

early settlers of our country in their days of disaster and suffering. Men who cavil with Providence and attribute to luck or chance or accident the escape from massacre and starvation of a company of destitute men, under circumstances like these, are either wanting in gratitude or have never been overtaken by calamity. My recollection of those gloomy days is all the more vivid because I was among the indigent ones.

This region was then the rendezvous of the Bannack Indians, and we named the settlement "Bannack," not the Scotch name "Bannock," now often given to it.

Montana was organized as a territory on the 26th day of May, 1864, and I continued to reside in that territory until the year 1876, being engaged chiefly in official business of a character which made it necessary, from time to time, for me to visit all portions of the territory. It is a beautiful country. Nature displays her wonders there upon the most magnificent scale. Lofty ranges of mountains, broad and fertile valleys, streams broken into torrents are the scenery of every-day life. These are rendered enjoyable by clear skies, pure atmosphere and invigorating climate.

Ever since the first year of my residence there I had frequently heard rumors of the existence of wonderful phenomena in the region where the Yellowstone, Wind, Snake and other large rivers take their rise, and as often had determined to improve the first opportunity to visit and explore it, but had been deterred by the presence of unusual and insurmountable dangers. It was at that time inhabited only by wild beasts and roving bands of hostile Indians. An occasional trapper or old mountaineer were the only white persons who had ever seen even those portions of it nearest to civilization, previous to the visit of David E. Folsom and C. W. Cook in the year 1869. Of these some had seen



**JAMES BRIDGER.**