

# The Inverted Pyramid: An Important Landmark on Kearny's 1846 Trail

By Tom Jonas, January, 2006 (Revised March 29, 2006)

All photos and maps by Tom Jonas

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S.W. Kearny

*For the past several years I've been searching out the precise trail of the Army of the West across Arizona during the US and Mexican War. A key document in this study is the official report of Army Topographer Lieutenant William H. Emory.<sup>1</sup> In it appears the following description of a fascinating landmark: "...We found a large mass of many thousand tons...the shape of a truncated pyramid standing on its smallest base."<sup>2</sup> I had read this many times and had tried to imagine what it really looked like. As you will see, finding this landmark became an important piece of my research puzzle.*

## Background\_\_\_\_\_

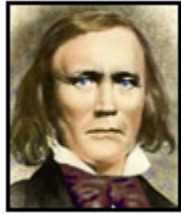
You may recall that the US and Mexican War had two primary causes. First, the people of the United States had generally accepted the idea that they had the God-given right, or "Manifest Destiny," to possess and settle the entire North American continent. The Mexican territories in the west were a major obstacle to this expansion and President James K. Polk, elected in 1844, was looking for a way to seize Mexico's northern provinces.



Secondly, the American settlers of the Mexican province of Texas had won a war of independence in 1836 and voted to become a US state in 1845. In spite of this, Mexico still claimed the area and hostilities broke out on the southern border of Texas in April of 1846. This was the excuse President Polk needed to declare war.

At the onset of the war, Major Stephen Watts Kearny<sup>3</sup> was assigned to assemble an army, known as the "Army of the West," and march west to reinforce the existing US forces already fighting in Texas and Mexico. This army initially consisted of about 1,600 dragoons, followed later by a group of about 600 Mormon volunteers and several other companies of soldiers. Kearny's orders were to seize New Mexico and then divide his forces. Part of the army would be left as an occupation force in New Mexico, part would be sent south to join the battle on Mexican soil, and the remainder would march to California under Kearny's direct command. In August of 1846 Kearny occupied Santa Fe without firing a shot. After setting up a new military government and dividing his army, he marched out of Santa Fe on September 25, 1846, with a force of 300 dragoons, bound for California.

First Lieutenant William Hemsley Emory was Kearny's chief engineer officer and acting assistant adjutant-general. Emory was born on September 7, 1811. In 1827, he enrolled at the United States Military Academy at West Point, graduating in 1831. In the Army, he became a member of the "Corps of Topographical Engineers." He was assigned to map and study the army's route as his military duties permitted.



Kit Carson

After marching about 125 miles south to Socorro on the Rio Grande, Kearny ran into the famous scout Kit Carson,<sup>4</sup> who was on a rapid express to Washington D.C. Carson had achieved notoriety a few years earlier upon the publication of the expedition reports of John C. Fremont, in which Carson figured prominently. Carson carried news that Fremont and Commodore Stockton had already defeated the Mexican army in California and were now in possession of that territory. He had planned to stop briefly at Taos to see the wife he had been away from for over a year and then proceed on to Washington D.C. with written and verbal messages for the president and the Secretary of War. However, since Kearny's original guide, Thomas Fitzpatrick, was not familiar with the southern trail, Kearny asked, then ordered, Carson to turn around and guide the army back to California. You can imagine Carson's disappointment at being unable to see his wife and then deliver messages to the president, but he reluctantly put those things aside and agreed to guide Kearny back over the same trail he had just traversed. Fitzpatrick was sent on to Washington with the dispatches.

Carson soon convinced Kearny that it would be nearly impossible to travel the Gila trail with the supply wagons that accompanied the army so Kearny decided to send the wagons back to Santa Fe and continue on with pack mules. He also sent back two-thirds of his dragoons, cutting his force to only 100 soldiers.

Kearny's trail to California has been a major focus of my study in recent years. In the course of my research I ran across an excellent article by George Ruhlen in the July 1957 issue of the New Mexico Historical Review titled "Kearny's Route from the Rio Grande to the Gila River." I thought it would be a great project to start where Ruhlen left off and continue the analysis across Arizona. A paper which I delivered at the Arizona History Convention in Safford in 2004 was the first part of that project. In it I traced the trail of Kearny's army along the Gila River and left them camped on the San Francisco River, now called the San Carlos, in southeastern Arizona. Today, in the second part of the project, we'll follow them on a less-understood trail into the mountains south of Globe.

## The Trail\_\_\_\_\_

The army's October 31, 1846 campsite was three miles north of the mouth of the San Carlos River and about 5 miles south of today's town of San Carlos. Kit Carson knew there was an impassable canyon a few miles ahead. He had been through this area twice before: first in 1830 with Ewing Young's trapping party and again at the end of September of 1846 – only about a month before the current trip with Kearny. Those previous trails were unsatisfactory for the army so Carson had to find a new way through the mountains.





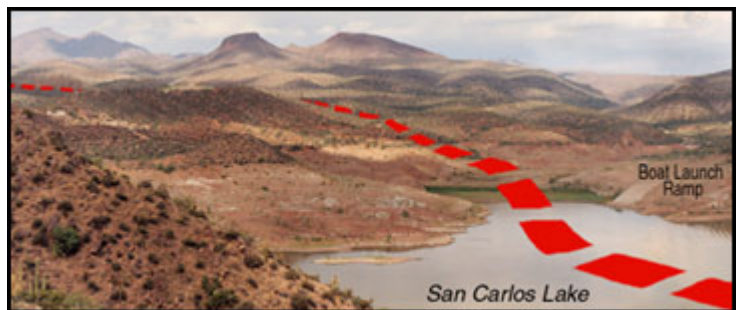
From the San Carlos they marched cross-country for a few miles and rejoined the Gila River just above the site of Coolidge Dam, which marks the beginning of the canyon. Here they watered the animals and filled their vessels with water for the *jornada*. The location of this halt was near the mouth of Soda Canyon not far from where the San Carlos Lake boat launch ramps are today. At this point they left the river and began the climb into the Hayes Mountains. Soda Canyon formed a wide and inviting path for

their exit from the river but from there the trail becomes much less obvious.

Dr. John Strother Griffin, the camp surgeon, describes the preparations on November 1:

*"The guide warned us this morning that we would march but six miles before we should leave the River – we would be headed off by a cañon – and it might be three days before we should see water again – this was rather a gloomy prospect – we therefore filled everything that was portable and would hold water – with that fluid – coffee pots, gourds, canteens, and some had their gum elastic cloaks made up in the shape of bags, and filled with water."*<sup>5</sup>

As far as I can tell, the route they took after leaving the river has never been determined with any precision. The map drawn by Kearny's topographer, Lt. Emory, is not very helpful, nor are his longitude readings, which are often in error by several miles. I began plotting possible routes on the map by following clues in the diaries of the travelers. I had several theories about where they might have crossed the mountains but it soon became obvious that they eventually reached the valley of Ranch Creek, 13 miles southeast of Globe, after crossing the main summit ridge. This narrowed my study area considerably.



The mouth of Soda Canyon begins Kearny's mountain detour.

Before we continue the search for the mountain detour, I want to mention an important point referred to by Dr. Griffin. Immediately after his description of their preparations for the long, dry march he writes this:

*"We started out on an Indian trail, up the mountain. Carson had never traveled this trail, and did not know anything of the country on it but from its course he thought it best for us to follow it. We followed on up the trail & up the mountain – sometimes a very good road, then again rough."*<sup>6</sup>

The early Euro-American explorers like Fremont, Sitgreaves, Whipple, and many others get credit for blazing new trails into the west. If you read their diaries, however, you'll find that a large portion of those trails followed preexisting paths established by local Indians for hunting, migration, ceremonial, and trade purposes. Following these already-established roads provided the best chance of finding water and food sources and usually the easiest route cross-country, or, as my friend Jim Byrkit puts it, "the most direct course of least resistance between point A and point B."<sup>7</sup> Kit Carson did not blaze a new path but led the army along an existing trail, trusting it to carry them through the mountains.

Kearny's Adjutant, Captain Henry Smith Turner, tells us about their trail of November 1, 1846:

*"We have marched today about 17 miles-... We struck at once into the hills almost at right angle to the river, for the purpose of avoiding an impassable kanyon through which the river flows a short distance below where we left it. After leaving the river we wandered through dry ravines and up and along the stony sides of precipitous hills - after wandering about 10 or 12 miles came to a ravine where there was water enough for a camp"*<sup>8</sup>

How did Captain Turner know the mileage? He had an odometer. Since Kearny had sent his wagons back to Santa Fe on Kit Carson's advice before leaving the Rio Grande, the only wheeled vehicles on the march were two small howitzers, or portable cannons. A device was attached to one of the howitzer wheels to count its rotations and this reading was then multiplied by the wheel's circumference to determine the distance traveled. One of Captain Turner's responsibilities was to record the daily odometer data.

From their camp near the summit Lieutenant Emory wrote about their trail up the mountain. As I read the diary I realized that he had mentioned a very important clue. He says:

*"Lower down we found a large mass of many thousand tons of the finer conglomerate, the shape of a truncated pyramid standing on its smallest base. It appeared so nicely balanced a feather might have overthrown it. A well levelled seat of large slabs of red ferruginous sandstone, altered by heat, indicated we were not on untrodden ground. It was the watch-tower of the Apache; from it he could track the valley of the Gila beyond the base of Mount Graham."*<sup>9</sup>

At this point I had identified several possible trails through the mountains. If I could locate this "truncated pyramid" I would have a definite landmark that would point me to the correct route. I plotted the possible routes out of Soda Canyon on a modern USGS map and on a field trip in March of 2005 I went out with three fellow-explorers to check them out on the ground.

We stopped at a high viewpoint to scan the landscape with our binoculars but we saw nothing that looked like it might be the pyramid. There is a place called "Standing Rock Catchment Basin" on the topo maps that I suspected might be near the rock so we drove on to investigate.

As we got closer we watched the hills for any unusual formations. There was nothing. Then, as the road took us around a small hill the rock suddenly came into view! There was no doubt this was Emory's "truncated pyramid." It sat majestically at the upper end of the ridges and valleys sloping south to the Gila River. The hills around it to the north had hidden it from our view until we emerged less than a half-mile from the rock. I imagine Lt. Emory and company were also awed by this sudden unveiling.

It is a huge boulder, larger at the top than the bottom, and it appears to be carefully balanced by some smaller rocks at its base. There were several recently exfoliated corners of the rock on the ground. Had they still been in place the resemblance to a pyramid might have been even more striking. It was difficult to judge its size from our parking place so we walked over to investigate. We estimated the rock to be about 45 feet high. It enjoyed a wide view of the surrounding hills and the valley of the Gila River so it was a perfect “watch-tower” for the Apache lookout that Emory referred to.



“Standing Rock” - Emory’s inverted pyramid.

Now I knew Kearny’s trail up the mountain. They must have left Soda Canyon only about a mile from the river and followed a gentle side canyon into the hills. There are well-graded dirt roads today that follow virtually the same route. These roads pass within a half-mile of Emory’s pyramid, known today as “Standing Rock.” Above the rock the only likely path to the summit is the one the present road climbs. All other routes from there are blocked by steep slopes. The modern dirt road brings you across a ridge of the Hayes Mountains and then drops into a small alpine valley named Tincup Basin just below the summit peaks.



Me at the rock

Kearny’s Aide de Camp, Captain Abraham Johnston writes:

*"After marching ten miles, we found a spring high up in the mountains where we watered; and going three-quarters of a mile further, we encamped."*<sup>10</sup>

Lt. Emory notes:

*"The spring consisted of a few deep holes, filled with delicious water, overgrown with cotton-wood; and, although the grass was not good, we determined to halt for the night, as the howitzers were not yet up, and it was doubtful when we should meet with water again."*<sup>11</sup>



Tincup Basin

There are actually two springs at the bottom of this basin. The first one appears to have the stronger flow but the second is at the very bottom of the basin and is sheltered by a few Cottonwood Trees.

Captain Johnston says they camped a short distance beyond the spring. I believe their November 1 camp was near the

second spring which is about a half-mile beyond the first. While the soldiers set up camp Emory climbed a peak that loomed over their campsite and calculated its elevation at 5,724 feet by using a siphon



The November 1, 1846 campsite

barometer to measure atmospheric pressure. There are two adjacent peaks within a mile of the campsite. He probably climbed to the saddle between these peaks and then followed the ridge to a summit. I can't be sure which of the two peaks he climbed. The one on the south looks higher from the campsite but it's actually 17 feet lower. Whichever peak he climbed, his altitude calculation was off by about 200 feet. This error is understandable since Emory lacked a reference point of known altitude and current local atmospheric pressure.

The following morning, November 2, they got a late start to allow time to check on the howitzer detail which was lagging several miles behind and also to meet with some local Indians in hopes of trading their worn-out mules for fresh ones. The Indians had agreed to meet them in a valley on the west side of the summit and even furnished a guide to take them to the appointed spot.



The November 2 trail on Emory's map

Since their way directly west was blocked by steep peaks, a question arises here about whether they detoured to the north or south to reach Ranch Creek. Emory's map reveals they looped southward from the November 1 campsite before turning west again toward Ranch Creek. I drove the road that follows their approximate trail twice and concluded that it would have been rough but passable, even for howitzers.

Captain Turner describes the road:

*"We marched some 7 miles, around the point of a mountain, over an excessively rough road, and entered on a beautiful valley where we found water and abundant grass, and where we shall await the arrival of the Kiataros [Coyotero Apaches] with their mules—hope not to be disappointed, as our animals are giving out daily, and we have still 4 or 500 miles before us."<sup>12</sup>*



Ranch creek at the November 2, 1846 campsite

Turner's 7-mile distance fits this southern road perfectly. The "beautiful valley" he mentions is that of Ranch Creek, about 13 miles southeast of Globe, Arizona. In 1851, the United States Boundary Commission surveyors Amiel Whipple and A. B. Gray<sup>13</sup> also found Apaches living in this area and it's still a part of the San Carlos Indian Reservation today. The army layover in this valley for an extra day to repair the howitzers and allow the mules a much-needed rest. More importantly, it would be a day for trading with the Apaches.

Lt. Emory records that the Indians had promised to bring 100 fresh mules to the Ranch Creek valley to trade to the army. This was a critically important resupply. The army's pack and riding mules were suffering severely from the inadequate food and water along the trail. Many animals had to be left behind because they refused to proceed any further. It was beginning to threaten the success of the mission. The Apaches usually had a good supply of mules and cattle plundered from Mexico so Kearny was hoping to trade his worn-out stock for fresh ones.

Doctor Griffin describes the trading:

*"About 8 o'clock a few Indians made their appearance—when the quartermaster—Major Swords<sup>14</sup>—pitched his tents and opened shop...one blanket a piece of scarlet, 4 yds of domestic—a paper of paint, two butcher knives and some rings and glasses for a mule. For this price we succeeded in getting seven mules—not fat or remarkable for sound backs either."<sup>15</sup>*

Emory sums it up:

*"Our expectations were again disappointed; the Indians came, but only seven mules were the result of the day's labor, not a tenth of the number absolutely required."<sup>16</sup>*

Emory later named this place "Disappointment Creek" and labeled it as such on his map.

The army did not expect to have another opportunity to trade for supplies and stock until they reached the Pima Villages, more than 100 miles ahead. After leaving the beautiful Ranch Creek campsite they continued west along the creek to its head then crossed over into the Dripping Springs Valley which led them back to the Gila River. They followed the Gila River to the Pima Villages, near our modern capital of Phoenix, and then on to California. I'll have to finish my analysis of the rest of the journey some other time. In a future paper I plan to continue this study to the Phoenix area. It is my hope that other researchers will pick up the trail through California and also a missing section along the upper Gila River in New Mexico. Together we can document the entire route of the historic march of the Army of the West.



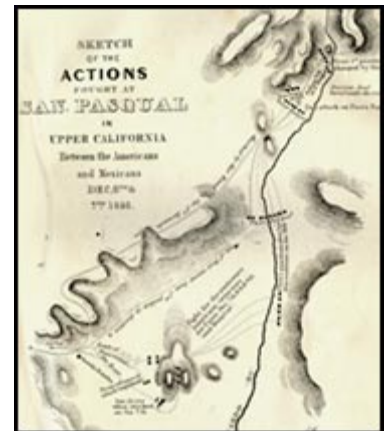
Epilogue \_\_\_\_

You might be interested in what happened to our soldiers when they arrived in California. The army's first battle with the Mexicans occurred December 6 at San Pascual, northeast of San Diego, California. When the smoke cleared, 18 soldiers were dead, among them our Captain Johnston, shot

through the head while leading his men into battle. General Kearny was wounded seriously enough that Captain Turner had to assume command. The army advanced but was soon forced to a nearby hilltop with no food or water and surrounded by a “largely superior force” of Mexican Lancers.

They had to send for reinforcements but their first messengers were immediately intercepted by the Lancers. On December 8, Kit Carson, Naval Lieutenant Edward Fitzgerald Beale, (later of Beale Wagon Road fame), and Beale’s Indian servant volunteered to try another escape. They snuck out at night, tucked their boots in their belts, and crawled between the triple cordon of Mexican sentries. Unfortunately, all three men lost their boots and had to walk the 25 miles to San Diego barefoot. The reinforcements were dispatched and the Mexican army quickly retreated.

Lieutenant Emory’s official report, *Notes Of A Military Reconnoissance From Fort Leavenworth, In Missouri, To San Diego, In California*, and its accompanying map, was used for years as a guidebook by emigrants, settlers, and gold-seekers traveling to California. Emory later mapped the boundary between the United States and Mexico and served with honor in the Civil War. He retired with the rank of brigadier general on July 1, 1876 after forty-five years of service and died December 1, 1887 in Washington, D. C. General Kearny recovered from his wounds and became military governor of California. In 1848 he served as civil governor of Veracruz and Mexico City but contracted yellow fever there and died October 12, 1848 in St. Louis. Kit Carson later become an army colonel and subdued the Navajo Indians in 1864. He died in 1868 at Fort Lyon, Colorado. Captain Turner resigned from the army in 1848 and went into the banking business. He died in 1881 at the age of 70. Doctor Griffin stayed in California and practiced medicine. The new U.S. territory of California that the Army of the West helped to win became a state in 1850.



Emory’s map of the battle at San Pascual

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> William Hemsley Emory was born on September 7, 1811. In 1827, he enrolled at the United States Military Academy at West Point, graduating in 1831. In the Army, he became a member of the "Corps of Topographical Engineers." At the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846, he became the chief engineer officer and acting assistant adjutant-general of the Army of the West at the rank of First Lieutenant. As a Topographical Engineer, Emory was ordered to map and study the route as his military duties permitted. His official report, *Notes Of A Military Reconnoissance From Fort Leavenworth, In Missouri, To San Diego, In California*, and its accompanying map, was used for years as a guidebook by emigrants, settlers, and gold-seekers traveling to California. Emory later mapped the boundary between the United States and Mexico and served with honor in the Civil War. He retired with the rank of brigadier general on July 1, 1876 after forty-five years of service and died December 1, 1887 in Washington, D. C.

<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Emory Reports, Ross Calvin, ed., University of New Mexico Press, 1951, p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Watts Kearny was born in 1794 in Newark, NJ. When the war of 1812 began, he left college to join the army at the rank of lieutenant and earned a promotion to the rank of captain for his distinguished service. At the beginning of the Mexican-American War he was made commander of the Army of the West with the rank of brigadier general. With about 1,600 men he marched over the Santa Fe Trail to New Mexico, entered the city of Santa Fe without opposition, and organized a civil government for the territory. On his way to join the forces of Commodore Robert F.



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Stockton in California he was besieged at San Pasqual, where he was wounded and suffered casualties of a third of his command before being rescued by relief forces sent by Stockton. After several skirmishes the combined forces reached Los Angeles and occupied the town. Kearny was military governor of the territory of California until May of 1847. Afterward he went to Mexico, where he was governor of Veracruz (where he contracted yellow fever and amoebic dysentery), and then of Mexico City for brief periods in 1848. He died in 1848 at the home of Major Merriwether Lewis Clark in St. Louis, MO of the diseases he had contracted in Mexico.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher "Kit" Carson was born in Kentucky in 1809. He ran away from an apprenticeship in Missouri to join the fur trade at the age of 16. When the fur business began to dwindle Carson, like many of his fellow trappers, took work guiding explorers and traders into the relatively unexplored west. He became famous when John C. Fremont published the report of his 1842 expedition, in which Carson figured prominently. He is also well known for subduing the Navajo Indians in 1864, as a colonel in the army. Carson died in 1868 at Fort Lyon, Colorado.

<sup>5</sup> Griffin, John Strother, *A Doctor Comes to California* by George Walcott Ames, Jr., San Francisco Historical Society, 1943, p.28. Griffin (1816-1898) was surgeon and camp doctor to the army.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Byrkit, Jim, *Learning about Historic Trails*, Sierra Azul Productions, 1999, p.2

<sup>8</sup> Turner, Henry Smith, *The Original Journals of Henry Smith Turner* by Dwight L. Clarke, University of Oklahoma Press, 1966, p.99. Captain Turner (1811-1881) was General Kearny's Adjutant.

<sup>9</sup> Lieutenant Emory Reports, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Johnston, Abraham R., *Journal of Captain A. R. Johnston, First Dragoons*, published in *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance*, By Lieutenant Colonel W. H. Emory, House Executive Document 41, Twentieth Congress - First Session, 1848, p.588. Captain Johnston, Kearny's aide-de-camp, was killed in battle with the Mexicans on December 6, 1846, before the army reached San Diego.

<sup>11</sup> Lieutenant Emory Reports, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> *The Original Journals of Henry Smith Turner*, p. 100

<sup>13</sup> Gray and Whipple were surveying the original international boundary along the Gila River under Boundary Commissioner John Russell Bartlett.

<sup>14</sup> This is Major Thomas Swords (1806-1886)

<sup>15</sup> *A Doctor Comes to California*, p. 29

<sup>16</sup> Lieutenant Emory Reports, p.119